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VOL. 60.
SHOOTING THE RAPIDS
BY
THE AUTHOR OF "AGAINST TIME".
IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. 2.

BERLIN
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VOL. II.

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VOL. 80

SHOOTING THE RAPIDS BY A. I. SHAND

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VOL. II

SHOOTING THE RAPIDS.

BY

ALEXANDER INNES SHAND,

AUTHOR OF "AGAINST TIME," ETC.

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VOL. II.

BERLIN

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CORRECTED EDITION

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SHOOTING THE RAPIDS.

CHAPTER I.

LADY DACRE'S TRUSTEE AND IRRESPONSIBLE EXECUTOR.

ALTHOUGH the funeral was to be strictly private, more than one carriage was drawn up at the door in Berkeley Square when Ralph reached it at ten minutes past twelve. Keenly alive to the scandalous impression his indecorous want of punctuality was likely to make upon the guests, yet he would not enter the dining-room they were assembling in without bestowing one hasty caress on his sister—without breathing one word of comfort in her ear. What he dreaded even more than the censures and damaging whispers that were sure to circulate among those whose golden opinions he had done so much to earn, was the having to confess to Alice what she must take for a lack of reverence to what she revered the most in the world. There was no help for it. Either that, or the breach of a promise he had ratified with solemn affection in their last

embrace. He cursed Asgill, he cursed Gaboche, he cursed Barber, himself, and his father, and rushed up-stairs. He calmed his hurried step as he passed the threshold; but it was impossible to still the quick-drawn breath, or to obliterate the traces of haste and flurry from his manner. Alice's lips said nothing but what was sisterly and grateful; but he fancied he read in reproachful eyes an eloquence of reproach they were never guilty of. No time, however, to explain, even had he had any explanation but a lie to offer; and at that moment he had no resolution for a lie. He snatched her into his arms, a hurried embrace and kiss, a few meaningless words, and he broke away again.

The few faces gathered round the spacious dining-room were even graver than the sorrowful occasion seemed to warrant. Place to rank, and there was Lord Wharfdale, who had buttoned his frock-coat, and sat austere upright, when Ralph entered, dispensing with the back of his chair, in a way singularly unlike his usual easy attitudes. Next him sat his nephew, Mr. Rufford, showing more like what he generally was than any of the rest, although Ralph's uneasy conscience detected a certain stiffness about the elbow-joint as they shook hands. Mr. Boycott, who looked a long eight years older than when we met him last, and whose face was something graver and less florid, although his form retained its stalwart heartiness, had thrown back his coat to give himself air; and with compressed lips, and hands thrust into his breeches pocket, had cast himself back in his seat. Off-hand as he was in matters of every-day life, he had the punctiliousness of the old school in those of family ceremony, and more than any man there did he blame what he told himself was the gross indecency of Dacre's behaviour.

“With his own mother,” he had whispered to his neighbour, “it would have been bad enough—so bad that we might have been sure there was some good reason to explain it—but with a step-mother, and with that sweet half-sister of his in the house up-stairs”—and the Squire shook his head, with a shake that implied much more than his good-natured lips would have cared to utter. His neighbour was Martin Hardcastle—just the man we left him, except for a few more gray hairs about his temples and in his whiskers. Now Martin Hardcastle held to matters of punctilio as little as any one living; and, as for the domestic affections or proprieties, he had never had much opportunity of cultivating or studying them. He had no great love for the departed one; for although he had been a good deal in her house, thanks to Ralph’s invitations in the capacity of virtual master of Berkeley Square, yet she had rather tolerated than welcomed him. But what had brought him to a house whose mistress would have preferred his room to his company had been an attachment to Alice, half chivalrous, half devout. He felt towards that bright young woman like a paternal knight-errant reclaimed, and longed to place at her disposal the resources of his courage, energy, experience, and indifference to law. When he saw the usually serene Lord Wharfdale look sour, when he heard the good-humoured Boycott speak out so strongly, he felt they ought to know, and that Ralph must have been guilty of a scandalous indecorum. A slight to the late Lady Dacre meant indifference to her daughter, and for the sake of the saintly girl-love to whom he had consecrated his devotion, for the moment Hardcastle felt half-inclined to fly at the throat of his comrade and benefactor. Another old acquaintance there was—our friend

the misanthrope of Sorrento. A couple of years before, Bourke, sorely against his will, had been expelled his Campanian paradise. Some French *littérateur*—in sheer vengeance, as Bourke always said, from having been denied the run of gardens that commanded the views of Ischia he specially chose to affect—had gone and unearthed an ancient manuscript in the Museo Bourbonico. It was a sonnet of Tasso, that furnished internal evidence that this haunt the Gaul had been repelled from had been the favourite resort of the immortal bard. Bourke did not believe him, but Murray did. Troops of tourists clamoured at the portals of the villa, suborned successive janitors, and glided, snake-like, among the orange-bowers. Bourke sold his desecrated Eden for a hotel, fled back to seek temporary solitude in the London crowd, and for two years past had been unsuccessfully advertising for another hermitage. He, too, had fallen, like Hardcastle, at Alice's feet, protesting all the time, by vehemence of speech and chilling expression of feature, against the weakness of the corner of his heart she had found her way to. Ralph he rather liked, but Alice he loved; and, always glum, he now looked more glum than ever. As for the other gentlemen present—there were very few of them—we know them neither by sight nor name. One or two were kinsmen of Lady Dacre; no very near ones, for of her immediate family there was no survivor. These gentlemen, as in duty bound, wreathed their faces in blacker frowns than the rest; and altogether, when Ralph had made the round of the party, he felt at least as little at his ease as he had expected to be.

Still, there was nothing to be done but bear it; and nothing could clear him, in their jaundiced eyes, but the plain truth painted in its blackest colours. It was

a penalty the more that false position of his condemned him to. This time the penalty was a grave one, for it compromised him so much just where he wished it least. He muttered a few words of explanation to each, words that meant nothing, and were accepted for what they were worth; and he felt embarrassed to awkwardness through the rest of the ceremony, in the consciousness that prejudiced witnesses would set any show of feeling down to hypocrisy. As the shovelfuls of earth rattled on the coffin-lid, he thought sadly of his sister, and of that bill of Klippenthaler's, and of the tumbling Ecuadors, of the impossibility of his giving Alice the love and protection she needed, and of his impending interview with Barber, and the chances of his step-mother's will—no chance whatever, as he knew, but then drowning men will catch at straws. Then he checked himself: how these twin devils of despair and need-born selfishness did hurry him along, in spite of his better feelings? Had he actually come to this, that his best hopes lay in robbing his sister? But, after all, did she not love him above everything now her mother was gone; and, if she could only have guessed his position, would she not have sacrificed her all to him, although truly she might have shrunk from him after the sacrifice. Would not her affectionate delicacy gladly spare him the humiliation of accepting it from her hands, by letting it come to him from those of her dead mother. Absurdity! Useless indulging in casuistry of the affections over what would never be! It was an idle dream that he should ever be exposed to such temptation. He could too, well afford to take a moral tone,—and he did.

So far Lady Dacre left her property as every one expected she would. Her daughter had everything, and thanks to the inheritance of a dead father and brother, the lawyer whispered that in his opinion that everything would be some 150,000*l*. That was very much Ralph's idea. Lately he had managed almost entirely for his step-mother—at least he had been consulted as to almost all her investments, and he ought to know the state of the succession. But what did surprise every one was the fact that he was to continue to administer it, and more irresponsibly than before. "Having the most absolute confidence in Ralph Dacre of Allonby, the son of my late husband, I solemnly confide to him the charge of my only child until such time as she shall attain majority or marry," and then the deed proceeded to constitute our friend sole trustee of all Lady Dacre's property for his sister's benefit until Alice came of age, and so long afterwards, as she should remain unmarried. For such a will as this, Ralph was at least as unprepared as any of the others. Certainly he had been adviser in ordinary to the late Lady Dacre; but she had been an excellent woman of business, quite capable of weighing considerations and auditing her own accounts. He knew she believed in him, and his assiduous and intelligent assistance had justified her faith. But this proof of absolute confidence surprised, embarrassed, and touched him. He was touched because he recognized that she at least, with the jealous eye of her maternal love, had appreciated his real attachment to his sister. He was embarrassed because conscience told him of the legacy of trial she had bequeathed to a sorely-tempted man. His deception had assured to him the torments of Tantalus, or—something worse—an hourly commentary on the prayer

“deliver us from temptation.” Had she known him as he was would Lady Dacre ever have dreamed of such a deed. If his innocent sister surmised a tithe of his grimy secrets, would not the ugly hazes of suspicion rise round her trusting heart. Had the men sitting round—Lord Wharfdale, Boycott, Bourke, and a second cousin of Lady Dacre’s who had come back to listen to the will—had these men guessed half his circumstances, how they would have shrugged their shoulders. As it was, he fancied he saw them raise their eyebrows and exchange looks, and perhaps they did. As for the lawyer, who at least knew much of the condition of the Allonby estates, when he glanced at Ralph between paragraphs, Ralph read in the look instinctive professional scepticism, heightened by knowledge of human nature and the particular circumstances. Conscience might have lent his fancy wings and set it to torment him with infernal ingenuity. Ralph had never felt so uncomfortable in his life, and his self-composure turned traitor just when he stood in need of its aid. In his haste he had seated himself with his face to the light—that ill-considered action was so very unlike him. And now he felt himself turning hot and cold—he was conscious he was blushing; he was forced to fidget. What to do with his hands he knew not, in fact they defied his control and flitted about his person in absolute defiance of his will. So false did he feel his position that it scarcely moved him to hear he had a personal legacy of 1,000 £., “My step-son, as I know, has an ample fortune, otherwise I should leave him something very different to a simple token of esteem.”—It was a passage that gave him ample food for reflection later. Nor was he much more affected by that other one, “I place my house in Berkeley Square at my step-son’s

disposal until my daughter attain majority or marry, and I request, should it suit his plans, that he keep up my establishment there and preserve her her present home."

The deed read, he felt that all eyes were fixed on him, although his own were bent on the ground. It was for him to speak, and his throat throbbed and his palate swelled and choked back the uncertain words. His mind was wandering, and for the life of him he could not recall it to define the situation. His self-control was gone, and his paralyzed will refused altogether to summon it. The silence grew awkward, oppressive, and exquisitely painful. For him he dare not break it. At last Mr. Boycott did. He saw Ralph was troubled and dumbstricken, although he did not in the least conceive why he should be more than surprised.

"Well Ralph," he said, rising to go, and holding out his hand, "I don't know whether I am to congratulate you on so weighty a responsibility; but I am sure you won't grudge the trouble, and Lady Dacre doubtless has made an excellent choice, eh, my Lord?"

Lord Wharfdale bowed—as Mr. Boycott had taken the word, he did not feel bound to say anything—and Ralph made an effort and rejoined.

"A heavy responsibility indeed—I could wish my step-mother had consulted me before making her dispositions; I should assuredly have insisted upon its being shared. But she has chosen to act differently, and the circumstances seem to leave me no option but to accept. However, I cannot take a decision lightly in a matter of such consequence. I shall think it calmly over. I shall see my sister, and to-morrow or next day, Mr. Gotobed, I shall communicate to you my resolution."

The lawyer bowed. The others interpreted Ralph's words as an intimation that the business being at end,

the meeting was dissolved. Bourke merely remarked as he shook hands with him, "If you mean to ask Alice her wishes we may consider it settled."

"I confess I am selfishly sorry to think there is but one thing to be done," rejoined Ralph hastily.

"Just so," replied Bourke, "that is precisely what I mean."

They separated on the doorstep. The Squire walked one way with the lawyer, Lord Wharfdale seized Bourke by the arm, as he was about to steal off in his solitary fashion, and forced him into his carriage. For a little neither said a word. Bourke was habitually taciturn; Lord Wharfdale seemed unusually thoughtful.

"Singular idea of Lady Dacre," said his lordship at last.

"Very; just like a woman."

"Unpleasant for him, as he seemed to think, being answerable for the judicious handling of a sum like that. I should have approved the idea more were he not a born speculator. What's bred in the bone, eh? I fear he's scarcely the man to wrap up his sister's talents in consols, or bury them in land, for you see he's quite unfettered. If he play and lose people may say ugly things. Well, luckily, he's a rich man. The rents of Allonby and that other German place insure his sister's money."

"Humph!" grunted Bourke, and then he checked himself. When Lord Wharfdale looked to him for an answer, his lips had screwed themselves together again. He remembered that the encumbrances that overweighted Allonby were not his secrets. He took refuge in the silence and the monosyllables that were too much his habit to excite remark on ordinary occasions. But his expressive ejaculation had given his companion

an idea, and moreover, somehow Lord Wharfdale's mind would run at that moment on the mysterious circumstances of Dacre's quitting the Foreign Office. Left to himself when he had dropped Bourke, he was meditating still, and the more he meditated the more he doubted the prudence of the will.

The individual most interested had no doubt about it at all. When her brother told it all to Alice her face grew brighter than he had seen it since her mother's death. He broached the idea of declining, but even had he ever entertained it in earnest, he could have had no heart to hold to his purpose against her pleading words and her looks of injured surprise.

"Not accept our mother's trust Ralph; deny her the prayer she makes you from the grave? But I know you don't mean it, and I am sure I shall be no trouble to you."

"It's not that, darling; you are a charge, I should have disputed to any one—it's your fortune. It is a very large one."

"And as mamma knew, no one could make it so easy to me as you. Surely Ralph, you don't think of robbing me of the fruits of her thoughtfulness. You can't dream of saying 'no,' when she made so sure you would say 'yes?'"

There was no arguing against that, when it was backed up moreover by pressing considerations of prudence and self-preservation. Ralph kissed his sister, and promised to take over herself and her property in solemn trust. And then he left her to keep that appointment of his with Barber.

The consciousness of responsibility flatteringly conferred makes a man carry his head high in spite of himself. In spite of the burden tied round his neck—a

burden visible enough to Barber, although no one else might be aware of it—Ralph had gained a full inch in height when he strode into the usurer's apartment the second time.

"Is it acting or is it not?" was the question that astute individual asked himself, and his experience quickly told him that his visitor was elevated by exhilarating circumstances. "What luck some men have, and what a blessing it is to have relations when they're rich ones. He has dropped into such a legacy as he never looked for."

Ralph saw Barber eye him over and change his manner perceptibly to a more respectful one. He took his cue accordingly.

"Well Mr. Barber, here I am at much personal inconvenience to dispose of that little arrangement of ours; but pray let us despatch it at once, for this is a busy day with me."

"To be sure, Mr. Dacre; quite right, sir," rejoined Barber, bowing profoundly. Bows cost him nothing; but, on the contrary, often paid exceedingly well. "To be sure, sir; I know the sums you want, and am half inclined to hope I may manage to lay my hands on them. What we left to settle was the security."

"The security! Bah, Barber, it's only a trifle of 3,000*l*. I want, that note of mine you have chosen to pass to Klippenthaler included. You shall have my own bill for it, drawn at three weeks date; come, say my bill for 3,030*l*., that will suit us both; you will have enormous return for your money; I am content to pay dear for the time to turn myself. Nonsense, it's no use hesitating, and, indeed, if you don't close at once, I must find the money elsewhere."

"At your own bank?" queried Barber, innocently.

"No, sir, not at my own bank: if I had not my own reasons for going elsewhere I should never have come to you. But we shall not forward matters by losing our tempers. Will you do this for me, Mr. Barber? Yes or no."

"Stop one minute, Mr. Dacre: I am a plain man of business. Your position is changed since we separated, that I can see, and in the interval you have heard a will read. If you had been a much richer man by the reading of it, you would not have come back, so I own myself puzzled. Tell me, as plain matter of business, what you take under Lady Dacre's disposition, and doubtless we may deal, and on easy terms."

"I," said Ralph hesitatingly, "I have a legacy of 1,000*l.*, and the use of my step-mother's house till my sister comes of age. You see it enables me to sell the furniture in my place in Albemarle Street, if needful!"

"And pay the bills of sale on it—yes, I do see—so far. But forgive me, Mr. Dacre, why should you not be frank in your own interest, and make a clean breast of it. There is something more, of course, and when the will comes to be proved, I shall hear all about it in any case."

"True. But there is nothing more that concerns me directly. To be sure, I am left sole trustee for the property."

Barber had the habit of rapid reflection and he reflected. This story tallied with probabilities, while it accounted for Ralph's looks, and was much too unlikely to have been invented. Mr. Dacre and fortune had now exchanged pledges with a vengeance. There surely could be little danger in accommodating him.

"Very well, Mr. Dacre. As you must feel yourself, even with this paltry legacy your security is anything

but tangible; but I confide in your honour and firmly believe the only risk I run is in the uncertainty of human life. By ten to-morrow you shall have the money, if I can prevail on my friends to advance it. I suppose you will prefer it in notes to taking my cheque. Very well, at ten to-morrow, if you please, I shall call in Albemarle Street. I'll fill in your acknowledgment on the requisite stamp. You can hand it me signed when I let you have your money. Nothing like strict business dealings, even between friends. And Mr. Barber did manage to let Mr. Dacre have the money, and Mr. Dacre cut short his losses on the falling Ecuadors, and once more escaping shipwreck, gave a sigh of relief as he found himself floating in calm water for the moment.

CHAPTER II.

RALPH GENEROUSLY FÊTES HIS SISTER'S BIRTHDAY.

It is a couple of years since Lady Dacre's death, and Alice is of age. Every day she found reason to bless the maternal sagacity that had given her to her brother in absolute charge. Ralph had been perfect for her, and since he had shifted his residence to hers, had made Berkeley Square not only his house but his home. Reclaimed from his wild training and Ishmaelitish life, he had come to appreciate the blessings of domesticity. He looked after his pretty sister like an elderly hen with a solitary chicken, and when circumstances forced him apart from her, kept turning his head in her direction with nervous

anxiety. Beyond his occasional dinners out, when he saw her carefully deposited with Mrs. Rufford, or some other friend, he seldom suffered circumstances to separate them. He had given himself sufficient practice in his time in special-pleading with himself more questionable causes, but never had he pled with more ingenuity or more unvarying success, than when he argued he must make Alice his companion. He had often occasion to visit Paris, and the bright distractions of the Imperial capital must be good for a girl who had so quiet a home in England. So Alice had generally gone to Paris when he did, although he had been very careful to select her French society for her. He joined to the anxiety of a mother the shrewd experience of something more than an ordinary man of the world. His own special business lay in the glittering circles of the Empire, where the gold so easily and ambiguously came by, was as lightly and eccentrically spent. But although it was his interest to keep on excellent terms with the great financier; although his standing in social superiority might gravely jeopardize a lucrative tradepartnership, it was in vain that Madame Gaboche strove to lure *la belle Anglaise* for the adornment of her georgious banquets and glittering *routes*. Nay, even Madame la Marquise de Marcy failed equally, when, in obedience to the blended prayers and command of the Marquis her husband, she came to the Dacres on a similar mission. Yet the Marquis had relations of the Court, and the stock exchange, with the public men of every capital between the Neva and the Manzanares. His corps of feminine scouts, whose pay and allowances would have drained the revenues of a second-rate German kingdom, had the entrée to the bed-chambers of Queens and Empresses. From time to time the grateful autocrat

who made him his pet, tossed him a Cosmopolitan "question" to manipulate as he pleased, and he talked and speculated as a man conscious of controlling for the occasion the military power of the Empire. It took all Ralph Dacre's tact to save him from the imputation of servility, when he succeeded at last in making his way to the select little suppers of the Marquis. Yet with almost nervous prudery he kept his sister away from the grand salons of the Marquise, and if Miss Dacre was never bidden to the private entertainments at the Tuileries, although the lady of another imperial ambassador undertook to be the go-between, it was because it was understood to be more than likely the Imperial commands might be disregarded. Lord Wharfdale had family relations of old standing with the ancient houses in the Quartier St. Germain, and in these, on cordial presentation from him, Alice was received with open arms. She was young and pretty and fond of life, and we do not say she was altogether satisfied with her eminently respectable lot in Paris. When she drove out solemnly with Madame la Duchesse de Fougères and her frigid daughters, in the sombre-coloured Berlin, with the saturnine Breton servants behind the ponderous Norman horses, she may have looked with envy at the billows of jewel-crested gauze and cashmere, whirl past her in low barouches and phaetons drawn by English thoroughbreds. When she met of an evening, a social group strongly dashed and sobered by the saintly and priestly element, she may have contrasted her company regretfully with that to which the blazoned passes lying on her table at home would have admitted her. But on that head, Ralph was caressingly inexorable, and the lips he closed with kisses were hermetically sealed, when she saw him share a sacrifice

he must feel far more than she, and only as reluctant matter of duty, go by himself into the gayer world.

Each year he had taken her with him on a progress he had made to Heppenstall. She delighted in the Black Forest glades, in the lights and shades among the kindling stems of the beech woods, in the fragrant resin that breathed off the pine-trees as hill and valley slumbered in the summer sun.

"It is a shame and disgrace, sir, that you have not restored the old Schloss," she exclaimed as she stamped her little foot on the weeds of the gravel before the boarded windows. "A man so rich as you, a bachelor with nothing and no one to spend your money upon, has no manner of excuse."

And Ralph shrugged his shoulders, frowned and smiled, "My idea is to have it restored on a suitable scale by an architect who goes in for Ruskin, and knows something of adapting art to nature"—and pending those Greek Calends, he had glass and sashes fitted to the windows, and a small suite of apartments in one corner restored and furnished with unexceptionable taste.

"It is a scandal, Ralph, that you have no sort of residence on Allonby, you who could afford so well to build a handsome one. Seriously, it is hardly right of you, dear, never to spend among the people there one shilling of all the money you draw from Northumberland. If they had been Irish you would have been shot long ago, and in my opinion you would have deserved it, only that you never give them the chance; but it is positively cowardly to take advantage of their prejudices in favour of the law. You like the place you always say, and yet you shake your head. 'No use building a big house we may never live in.' But we ought to live

in it, and besides there is no need to build a big house if you don't like to, although I don't see myself how you could spend your money better. Build a small one, if you please, something between a Swiss chalet and a Scotch shooting-box. Come, I tell you what it is, Ralph dear, you shall let me make you a present of one and pay for it when I come of age. You know you are always giving me things, and are so stupid about never having anything of me: anything worth the having, that is."

But against accepting this generous offer Ralph stoutly protested, and was sternly obdurate to all his sister's prayers. But, then, what was to be done? He could not long deny her anything she had set her heart upon, particularly when the means of gratifying her were—as she thought—so very easy. He did not like to know she blamed him about anything, and he knew she was in earnest when she urged him occasionally to go to Allonby. He had the money, as it chanced, and money kept coming in, so he ran down to Northumberland, and took Ridley into his counsels. The result was a plain but snugly picturesque cottage residence, that reared itself on the sunniest slopes of the Cheviots, a splintered brown crag frowning behind it, and a foaming streamlet tumbling down by the bottom of the precipitous flower-garden in front.

Yes, Ralph had money, and money was coming in; and now-a-days he only exchanged the most distant bows with Mr. Barber. He was too prudent to cut that gentleman; although for a season it may keep them folded, money has wings, as he knew full well, and the richest of us never know what the future may bring forth. Barber may have had his own thoughts, and thoughts not altogether favourable to our friend, when he saw the impoverished Mr. Dacre become of a sudden

the administrator of a great fortune, meeting all his engagements with most commendable punctuality. But Mr. Barber was a man whose business thrived by his keeping his counsel as a rule; and when he did whisper to Asgill, Asgill, to his surprise, would do nothing more than insinuate. The truth was, Asgill's old friendship with Dacre was restored upon the old basis of common interests. He knew that if Mr. Dacre was only flourishing from day to day, and living luxuriously from hand to mouth, the means he disposed of were in a sense his own, and that Miss Alice Dacre had hitherto been no loser by her brother's dealings. What judgment purists and moralists might pass on the origin of Mr. Dacre's reviving prosperity was one thing. Mr. Asgill himself was an easy-going man of the world, and a professed speculator; and he took broadly liberal views of life and financing. As for Mr. Dacre, he had submitted his own conduct to much self-examination: his reasoning might have been casuistical, his self-constituted judge might have been possibly prejudiced by self-interest. At any rate he had silenced, and we might almost say, satisfied, his scruples. The case was briefly this:—Gaboche, Asgill & Co. hearing of the confidence reposed in their quondam partner, placed themselves at once in his position, pictured his feelings after their own, and straightway jumped to the conclusion that he was become absolute possessor of 150,000*l.* "*Joli magot,*" as Gaboche remarked, and in his reviving respect and admiration for the talent that had secured such unlimited trust, he came over special to London, and sought and obtained an interview with the new-made millionaire. He rushed at him with oily cordiality, and grappled both of Dacre's reluctant hands.

“Mon dieu, my good friend, it was only yesterday I heard from Asgill you had no share in our last little affair. I telegraphed at once—what, it has arrived?—and came over on the instant to offer you my excuses for an incomprehensible oversight, and to pray of you to associate yourself to me. Excellent affair, all the world enrages itself at being excluded from it; at least fifty per cent. of benefice, and turned in three months. Tell me, you acknowledge it to have been but an oversight; you accept; you are one of us?”

Ralph did not cast himself physically and metaphorically into the arms of the impulsive Frenchman, but he suffered himself to be soothed and conciliated. He parted on sufficiently friendly terms with his former ally, craving, to the affected surprise of the other, a few hours for consideration. These few hours were passed in much mental travail of mind, travail only suspended when Asgill brought documents and figures to prove beyond a doubt that the affair was really excellent, and that Gaboche actually was giving money away. “Speculating, in short,” as Asgill summed up, “on the chance of future returns from you.” And when Asgill had left him to his reflections, Ralph resumed the mental debate.

“If I consented, and people knew I did, and knew all my circumstances, they would talk, of course. What would they not talk about? How do I stand? If I act with the precise honesty that is the luxury of the wealthy, in a few weeks at latest I am branded a bankrupt impostor, and held up to the contempt of the world—and Alice. I might fly the world, and, who knows, perhaps I might be all the happier. Alice would never give me up. No, I believe she would stick by me through good report and evil. But to see her love

settling into pity: to know her purity loathed and shuddered at me in spite of herself; in place of her hanging about me when I came in, to watch her rallying her courage for the cold kiss she might pay me as a tribute to my feelings; to know that even if I tore myself from her, my shadow would still be falling black upon her path; that she would be haunted for ever with the horrid dread of my return——. And if I accept this offer, and gamble and lose, shall I even then be worse off than now? I solemnly bind myself by the strongest mental reservations, by oaths so deep that they must tie a man irrevocably to his own resolutions, that, come what will, the money I administer in trust shall be sacred. And oaths out of the question, I do know myself, and dare not rob Alice. I shall break at worst a few months later; the commercial world, who are used to that sort of thing, and count it in the stakes when they cut into the game, will be let in for a few thousands more; and what does it matter?"

And after grinding drearily round in that precious circle of reasoning, not in these precise words, but in that exact sense, Ralph Dacre closed at last with Gaboche's offer. A single sentence had sufficed to bind Barber over to a few weeks of patience. If it drew its persuasive logic from the significance in Dacre's look as he talked of altered circumstances, who could blame him? Surely all tactics are fair in fighting an usurer. If the wary money-lender chose to misinterpret the meaning of a client's eye, that was his own look-out. Gaboche was right, and the excellent affair progressed so smoothly that Ralph half felt he had indeed received in a gift the profit he so speedily realized. It was the turn of his fortunes. True, they never came in a flood, so as to leave him high and dry beyond reach of all

temptation in the easy affluence he ambitioned. But they floated him on a broad calm stream that carried him along most comfortably from day to day. A more careless nature might have made itself perfectly easy. But Ralph had the habit of meditation; and as he could not help reflecting that this fair weather could not possibly last for ever, that his run of luck must turn, and fail him sooner or later, we cannot say that he had a very pleasant time of it.

Meanwhile, however, so thoroughly did he believe in his temporary fortunes, that he drew his sister into a sleeping partnership, and freely handled her money with his own. He honourably accounted for all the profits, but then no one but himself was in the secrets of the separate accounts. He was careless in matters of business detail, somewhat rough and ready in his calculations, and what did it matter, after all? If he lived he would clear accounts with her when he took careful stock of the trust funds against her twenty-first birthday. If he died, had he not executed a formal will, which left her every shilling of his property? Meantime, it was better for both of them that their joint game should be made in his name; by giving him more consideration, it let her in for far better things.

The confederates,—such men as Asgill and Barber, were the only individuals lately introduced behind the scenes who were aware that Dacre's position was what the world might have called eminently ambiguous. Bourke, to be sure, knew the illusory nature of the returns from Allonby, and sometimes sought Ralph's eye when Alice abused her brother playfully for spending all the Allonby rents in London. But Ralph, by close study of the old gentleman's character, had managed to gain his ear. He had persuaded him that if he kept his sister in the dark

as to the real value of the Northumbrian estates it was in consideration of her sensitive nature and the respectful love she bore her father's memory. It would have shocked and scandalized her to know Sir Wyndham a reckless spendthrift. It was the less difficult to persuade Bourke that Ralph was rich, although not so rich as the world thought him, that, independent of his being possessor of Heppenstall, he saw him chairman of a flourishing city bank, and knew him by his own account to have other excellent irons in the fire. So Bourke satisfied himself, and lulled the passing suspicions of Lord Wharfdale, if suspicions they could be called; and Mr. Boycott, and every one else who troubled themselves about the matter, deemed it the most natural thing in the world that the rich brother and sister should live together in the handsome fashion they did, although the sister was still a minor.

Now she was coming of age, and a good deal of *badinage* had passed between them in view of her approaching birthday. She looked forward to it with supreme composure; to her it made no difference and brought no cares. As it was, she had always had all the money she wanted. She could gratify each whim as fast as it was born, and to do her justice, she had no great number of them for a pretty heiress, who might very well have been spoiled. As for the burden of her riches, of that her brother relieved her graceful shoulders. He always did his best to save her all manner of trouble.

But now that the day drew near when he ought to give an account of his stewardship, Ralph felt something more like relief than pleasure, at knowing that her money had actually grown in his hands. How he congratulated himself that he had turned a deaf ear to those overstrained scruples that would have played the

very mischief with himself and his prospects. Instead of letting his conduct be influenced by fear of the world's opinion, or rather the world's calumny, he had simply acted as he would have done had Gaboche come to him with his offer the day before the reading of the will. And here he was, no exile or outcast, but still Mr. Dacre of Heppenstall and Allonby—much regarded in fashionable coteries, and highly esteemed in city circles. His sister, too, was the richer, and likely to be richer still; and thus, when she came down to breakfast on the eventful morning, he met her with the light-hearted consciousness of having been, not only a faithful manager, but a brilliantly capable one.

"Good morning, child! Many happy returns of the day; and grace and strength to escape the snares of your riches."

"Thanks, dearest Ralph," replied the heiress, holding up her lips to be kissed—it is remarkable that even the most affectionate sisters rarely take the initiative in kissing. "Thanks, dearest Ralph, for your good wishes, although, really, I don't feel that I deserve the reproach they imply. I should have said myself, I was a woman of discretion, and I'm quite sure you can't accuse me of making a bad use of my pocket-money."

"I can't pretend to say what use you may make of it. I sadly neglect my duties, for I am sure I never inquire. As for exceeding your allowance, that would be hard to do, considering it amounts to just as much as you are pleased to make it."

"And you, who are always pressing more money upon me, fostering extravagant habits, and urging me to all manner of excesses, you ought to be ashamed of yourself for turning round in this way. If you have

no self-respect—respect for yourself as Ralph Dacre, I mean—remember your position as my guardian.”

“Well, honestly, Alice, I cannot say you are extravagant; on the contrary, it would be but an English rendering of the Spanish, ‘May you live a thousand years,’ if I were to wish you spared to run through all your money.”

“For heaven’s sake, don’t. Only fancy some malevolent fairy catching at the idea and granting the prayer. What a dilemma I should be reduced to. Prodigality after established habits of parsimony on the one hand, perennial hideousness bound in parchment and wrinkles on the other. But one thing I really am sorry for. What a pity it is I am not a feudal landowner like you in virtue of my birthright—hereditary mistress of the affections of a happy tenantry, their country’s pride. Poetry and romance for prose; bonfires blazing on the Cheviots; oxen roasting whole; the streamlet that runs down the middle of the High Street of Heppenstall running with wine from the Bergstrasse, under arches of Black Forest evergreens. But it’s so prosaic coming of age in Berkeley Square,—being woke by cab-wheels instead of shouts, by barrel-organs, and pipes from the Abruzzi, in place of a band retained on purpose to play a choice selection of appropriate melodies; dusty trees and dingy railings and twittering sparrows——”

“With whom you ought to have a fellow feeling. How you do run on, as if you could be in Baden and Northumberland at once, even if you had the misfortune of becoming the victim of an ovation. ’Gad, I shall never forget the demonstration with which the Baden people welcomed me with the worthy old Müller at their head.” And Ralph sighed, as the disagreeable associa-

tions connected with the hollow mockery he had to play the chief part in came curdling up in his mind, like the thunder-turned cream to the surface of his tea. For the life of him, he could not help envying his sister, and contrasting her lucky lot with his—longing, at least, that his lot might be made to resemble hers. Fortunate girl, if she only knew it, with a handsome income in hard cash, and no trouble or responsibilities. But of her own good fortune she knew almost as little as she did of the sources of her income. Of course, that is the way in this world. Providence never lavishes its gifts with unstinting hand; and Alice had no schemes to further with her riches; no vanity or ambition to satisfy; in reality, it was only her dressmaker and her friends who profited by her prosperity. A liberal bill paid to the first, without taxing the items—a luxury of unappreciated presents and useless knickknacks lavished on the others. So goes the world.

For the friends and the milliners all very well—that was Alice's fancy for spending her money; if she cared rather more for raspberry tart than for *vol-au-vent à la Toulouse*; if she did not know the difference between Beaujolais and full-bodied and fragrant-flavoured Burgundy, that was her look out; and he did not—no—he did not—grudge her her good fortune. But that was only a provisional state of things, one that by no possibility could last long. Whenever he thought of it—and the thought would intrude on him again and again, although he was always thrusting it forcibly out by the head and shoulders—whenever he thought of her, and her looks and ways, putting her wealth out of the question, he marvelled she had never given him greater cause for jealousy. Men clustered and buzzed round her, like wasps and bluebottles about a peach; but, in the

multitudes of admirers, there had been safety, and he knew she cared for none of them. But marry she must some day, and soon; and he could not help thinking how he should hate the lucky husband that snatched her from the home she brightened—the man who should win 7,000*l.* a year, and one of the sweetest wives in England.

“Well, Ralph, when you are quite done with meditation, perhaps you will condescend to talk. I don’t know when I remember you so utterly neglectful of the papers—I should say of me—only you’ve been staring so uncivilly all the time, that I am inclined to fancy I must be the subject of your thought. Come, be frank for once; confess, and you shall be forgiven.”

If Ralph had been frank, he would have said, “I was thinking, dear, how very pretty you are; how very odd it is you should be in love with no one: how many people *must* be in love with you: and how certain it is you will very soon be married.” She was very pretty, and very like her mother, as we knew Lady Dacre at Naples—the same deep brown hair, clean cut features, the same clear complexion, and much the same expression, even to the smiles that lurked in the dimples. There was the same delicate poetry of movement—a grace she could scarcely have divested herself of, even had she overcharged herself with consciousness, and then done her utmost to be awkward. She showed her mother’s height, and a promise of her mother’s figure, as she rose, in her brother’s mental absence, to hand him his teacup, and help herself to the toast. Only throw in abundance of expression in reserve; give her her fair forehead, and fresh cheeks, and clouds of simple muslin falling back in wide floating sleeves from hands sensibly sized, although nearly perfectly shaped,

and wrists overloaded with heavy Roman bracelets of simple gold, and she reminded you of the Court ideal of some rural beauty as it figures in a picnic by Watteau or on a Sevres jar.

Certainly, if Ralph had been frank, he might have said, "How very pretty you are; how impossible you should be left me long!" and, as to the former assertion, Alice, who was candour itself, and could not help being well informed on that point, must assuredly have blushed admission. But it was the second idea that was preoccupying her brother's mind, and that was one he would never have dreamed of broaching. He loved his sister next to himself—more than himself, in many ways, if a number of little sacrifices meant anything. At any rate, comparisons were odious, and he refused to indulge in them; but he much preferred to go on promoting her happiness, and his own, in his own way. Marriage was doubtless an honourable estate, and might be a happy one; and unquestionably her looks, and her other "good gifts," seemed to predestine her to it; but, in the meantime, he utterly declined to contemplate it for her, and would have been strongly prejudiced against any aspirant who set himself seriously to woo her to it.

So he started from his abstraction, and laughingly parrying his sister's attack without satisfying her curiosity, shook himself up into something like animation. "At all events, Alice, I hope you won't be left long *tête-à-tête* with such a dull companion. Breakfast is late: Hardcastle hoped to be in town last night, and depend on it he will soon be arriving with his congratulations. Odd thing, he should chance to be bringing despatches from Naples this particular day, of all days in the world."

"Why, odd? He is always on the move; far too often, indeed, for my liking as for his. That Foreign Office really is abominably parsimonious, and works its wretched messengers to death. By the way, you were once Lord Bullington's private secretary. Some one told me the other day, and much surprised I was that you never happened to mention it. You were influential enough to get Mr. Hardcastle an appointment: why don't you interfere now? And pray, sir, how was it you never told me anything of that early chapter in your biography? I am sure it is a thing you may well be proud of, the having filled such a place as so young a man."

Ralph was far more taken aback by his sister's very innocent remark, than he had shown himself when she taxed him with his long abstraction. A cab stopping at the door, followed by a loud quadruple knock, came to his relief. He rose and walked to the window.

"Martin Hardcastle, and to judge by his dress, far from fresh from his journey. As for his face, that would show no sign, if he had travelled night and day to Berkeley Square from Balkh——Halloa, Hardcastle, straight from London Bridge?"

"Straight from Foreign Office, at least, which I was compelled to take in my way. The Neapolitan boat had to put back in the face of a white squall; and in the French one we lay full twelve hours bobbing about among the Golden Isles, missed the train we meant to have caught at Marseilles, and only got here now. As I was charged with a special commission by Dacre against this particular day, and wanted to make sure of him before he went out, I came here at once. You'll forgive the condition of my apparel,

Miss Dacre, in consideration of my zeal; but I've sampled every sort of soil from Provence granite to Picardy and Kentish chalks."

"I'll forgive anything, except your calling me Miss Dacre. What have I done to deserve that, may I ask?"

"Come of age, to be sure. Well, Alice, and here I stand talking about myself instead of offering my congratulations. Those you'll take on trust, I know: it's not my way to talk, but I assure I didn't forget you."

"If you had," interrupted Ralph, getting up to ring the bell, "it would only have served her right, considering how oblivious she is of the first duties of hospitality. When did you eat last?"

"Upon my honour I can hardly say. I have been feeding by snatches ever since we breakfasted yesterday at Dijon. I only know I'm wolfish; and if you ask me what I'll have, Alice, I answer, I'll try anything and everything you have in your larder."

Alice laughed, and gave the servant, who appeared, the necessary orders. Ralph looked full five years younger since Hardcastle came into the room. Few men in England less liked liberties been taken with them, or indeed could less afford familiarities than he. For that very reason, perhaps, he enjoyed and encouraged the *sans gêne* with which Hardcastle took him and his house by storm; and had he been disposed to object to it, Alice had taken Hardcastle into her inner friendship. She loved almost as much as her brother, to hear the adventurer talk old times and tell of near things, and of the escapades that success alone redeemed from the imputation of insanity.

When the servant had gone, Martin handed Ralph a mysterious packet he had carried under his arm.

"Your property, as you very well know, young lady," said Ralph, passing it to his sister. "I've seen your curious and covetous eyes fixed upon it ever since Hardcastle brought it into the room."

"Oh, Ralph, what nonsense!" was all the truthful Alice thought fit to say, as she busied herself opening it. "How very, very beautiful!" was her next ejaculation. After a few moments of speechless entrancement she went into voluble raptures over what was really an almost matchless set of delicate pink coral necklaces, brooches, bracelets. Ralph had given Hardcastle full discretion to deal with Bolton for the handsomest set of the fashionable tint. What was the precise sum the envoy paid for what the dowager Majesty of Spain had longed for, and yet declined to buy for economical reasons, we have no means of knowing. Doubtless, it left small change out of a cheque for a thousand. Ralph was fond of money, but he liked his sister, too, and he could do things on occasions in princely fashion. Born rich, he would have shown as little meanness as many another spendthrift. "Why Ralph, dear, how terribly extravagant; it must have cost a fortune! The simplest gift would have done just as well for me: and if I did not know you could afford to pay for your love whims——"

"I was resolved, dearest, you should have a genuine Neapolitan souvenir of Naples, in memory of that memorable meeting in the Villa Reale, when I nearly killed your little Maltese."

"You are the most delicate, and thoughtful, and magnificent of brothers and guardians!" rejoined Alice, as she clung to him amid showers of kisses which she

offered this time instead of accepting. Ralph for the moment thought he was. Hardcastle looked on rather quizzically. He did not see quite clear into the matter, yet he felt a certain uneasiness at having been concerned in it. Necessarily he had been a good deal in Ralph's secrets. He was not kept fully informed as to the course of his speculations: he was sceptical as to the substance of his wealth, and he could not resist a doubt as to who had really paid Mr. Bolton's bill.

Even after the superb coral, his own gift of an exquisitely cut Roman intaglio, had a success, and deserved it; and all that day presents came pouring in on the heiress. As she had pretty nearly all money could procure her, it was inevitable people should load her with things she didn't want, and couldn't use—with jewellery that embarrassed her already ample choice, and costly nick-nacks there was no room for on her burdened tables. However, acquisitiveness is born in the nature of the best and most disinterested of us, and Miss Dacre passed a pleasant time in receiving the contributions that to-morrow would be a nuisance. Her only "evil quarter of an hour" was when Ralph would insist upon submitting to her a formal balance-sheet of the state of her property, duly vouched by a leading city auditor. Old Mr. Bourke was called into the conclave as a friend of the family, and confessed that Ralph had not done badly for his sister. After all, the outgoings of her share of a handsome establishment, her money had increased in a couple of years by 17,000*l*. He shook his head over some of the investments, although Ralph had busied himself lately with a view to possible prejudices, in shifting some of the more speculative. But he contented himself with a mild word of warning. Things seemed going well in the city in the meantime,

and then as he looked at Alice, he was of much the same mind as Ralph: it could not be very long before she and her property passed to the charge of a husband.

CHAPTER III.

RALPH SENDS ALICE TO MEET HIS FATE.

"So, Alice, the Ruffords want you to go down to Barham with them. Well, I don't think you can possibly do better. Indeed, I had made up my mind to turn you out of London at any rate. Dissipation begins to tell on you."

Alice made a little grimace, and glanced at the glass. As it flatly contradicted her brother's words, she could afford to smile at his insulting impeachment on her looks.

"Yes," he went on, "I don't care what your glass says, and of course no one else — except, perhaps, veteran admirers like Bourke or Martin Hardcastle, — are likely to tell you the truth. In the course of the last fortnight your luncheons have fallen off on the average by a mutton chop, and you have taken to exceeding in pale ale. No, you need not protest that you eat as much bread-and-butter at five o'clock as ever. That I am ready to believe, and it proves nothing, except a vicious and unnatural appetite. As I was saying when you interrupted me by turning to converse with your glass, you must be off to the country, and you can do no better than to go with Edith."

"And you, sir? Pray what do you mean to do?"

"Remain in town, off and on, for the next few weeks. Unluckily, I can't help myself. Business will be attended to, in season and out of season—as season interprets itself in Mayfair and Belgravia."

"And pray why should I not remain with you? In another week or so town will be quiet enough. No fear of my hurting my health with excess of gaiety."

"Because I can't afford to see you ever so slightly worn; and after your spring course of smoke and fog and tepid salons, I long to have you braced again in country air."

And Ralph fondly stroked back his sister's heavy hair from a forehead that showed no sign of contact with the contaminating touch of London.

"Besides," he went on, "I fancy I must run over to Paris. No, this time I can't take you, and it's no use looking: for from Paris I shall probably have to make a dash at Frankfort, Vienna—heaven knows where!—a regular Stock Exchange tour, about investments of mine—and yours."

"Always working for me, dearest Ralph, and I always forgetting it. I do believe I am the most ungrateful girl in the world. I take your affectionate labour so much as a matter of course, that I hardly ever thank you for it, even in my heart. How uncomplainingly you support the burden my mother cast on your shoulders—only careful that I shall never tire a finger with a corner of the load. How very few men would have done like you. One would almost say you took a pleasure in your constant sacrifice."

And his honour, and his credit, and his properties, and his position in society saved as by a miracle and by Lady Dacre's lucky will, and it was this exertion his

unsuspecting sister was so grateful for. He would have muttered "blessed innocence;" but with her he could not frame his lips to what might bear the semblance of a sneer. — He felt remorseful, as he had often done before, as if he were swindling her of her love under the foulest pretences: as if he were trading on her ignorance, and accepting from her affections what he had no sort of right to. One thing was, she did not suffer by the exchange, although he might gain. On the contrary, she was the richer as well as he by all the feeling she paid away, and, as he generally did when their conversation took a turn of the sort, he changed the subject, and proceeded to settle the details of her departure for Barham.

"So far as I know, Alice," said Mrs. Rufford, "we shall find no one there, and I am very glad of it. We can't be always sacrificing to society. I do like to go home to drop the hostess and become the girl once more, and Barham is the only place where I can manage the illusion, in spite of the nursery Dick will insist on dragging with us everywhere.

"As if you could ever sleep comfortably out of reach of the children's cries," interposed her husband.

"They never do cry, you know. Never were such children, as you always say yourself, Richard. Well, Alice, to return to our sheep from our lambs. As I was saying, you will find the old house standing empty for us, and no one expected but Lord Wharfdale. He and papa had their usual battle, as they always do when we wander homeless out of London in search of quarters. Generally, I try hard to be neutral. This once I became a partisan, for I had set my heart on Kent after this miserably long and hot season. So papa and I carried the day by a compromise, and Lord

Wharfdale agreed to take Barham for a week on his way to the Continent. He is to pick us up on his return, and carry us south. In the meantime, we shall have a month at Barham—and how I do long to be there. Papa may abuse it as he likes; but I must say I think the new railway a blessing.”

The beaming expression the Squire’s face wore as he welcomed them at the station showed no signs of his being in malice with the railway or anything else. If he found it changed days or dull ones when he returned from his walk or ride to a silent home and a solitary meal a reunion like this almost made amends. He had lost the tranquil happy existence that had grown so much into a habit that he had ceased to be grateful for it; but, in return, he had his intense bursts of domestic enjoyment, like that he was looking forward to now—bursts, the fierce flame of whose happiness was fanned by the consciousness that its minutes were numbered.

But the excitement of stagnation alternating with reaction had aged him. His daughter’s anxiety exaggerated the wrinkles, and the spread of the grey in his hair; and her dancing eyes sparkled in tears, as she was demonstratively lavish of smiles and caresses. Her father’s isolation was the one dash of bitterness in her overflowing cup of happiness. She was constantly vexing her sensitive conscience as she halted between a couple of duties. As it was, she took her good-natured husband a good deal oftener to Barham, and kept him there a great deal longer than he altogether liked.

There was a carriage, an omnibus, a cart at the station, and great local excitement. The whole staff and the hangers-on interested themselves in the Squire’s family and guests as if it had been their own immediate

concern. The beam of Mr. Boycott's face was reflected on theirs, and except the passing clouds on Edith's brow, everything was as sunny as the day and the country.

"Glad to see you among us again, Mr. Rufford," exclaimed the rubicund station-master, touching his hat.

"What you here, Sparks? I'm delighted to see you have got over your prejudices?"

Sparks blushed rather. "Well, sir, you see when the company came a-tearing down here in course they upset the 'Highflyer,' and you see, sir, when a man gets tipped off the box he's sat on for a matter of twenty years, and picks himself up with his pockets turned outside-in, it shakes the prejudices out of him a bit. Yes, I am here, sir, and I begins to get used to standing on the side of the road instead of travelling up and down it."

"Well, I'm glad to find you shunted on to so snug a siding. You know Sparks, Edith—Sparks who used to drive the 'Highflyer.'"

"One might almost say the same thing of you, Mr. Rufford. Many's the day you've sprung that chesnut team along the flat from Barham hill to Crayford turnpike."

Meanwhile the nurses and the maids were being packed away inside the omnibus; the children drumming their gloves off on the glasses in their vivacious delight; the heads of the party were seated in the barouche, little Edith Rufford being ravished from her nurse's arms at the moment of starting by her delighted grandfather, greatly to her pride and satisfaction.

"I told Alice, papa, we should have the house to ourselves; and after all we've gone through in the last few weeks we are both rejoicing in the prospect. Alice,

in the ingratitude of her nature, positively delighted at breaking away from all her admirers, and leaving them inconsolable."

"What nonsense you do talk, Edith; the only excuse to be made is, that you are intoxicated with your native air. But sincerely, uncle——" It had long been settled that Alice was Mr. Boycott's niece; the relationship was in the family: she was far more of a niece to him than Ralph is nephew—— "sincerely, I am so pleased to think we shall be a quiet family party."

The Squire looked rather guilty, and began apologetically: "Upon my word, my dear, I am verry sorry, but I never thought——"

"What? you have people staying here!" In spite of herself, the ejaculation escaped Edith, and her face fell for a moment, while her father, although not very quick, chanced to catch the glance of disappointment she exchanged with Alice. Next second both were abjectly penitent, but the harm was done. The Squire's suspicion of his criminality was changed to conviction; and for once in his life he was overwhelmed with remorse and repentance at having obeyed his instinct and been hospitable.

"People? no, my dear, no people; no one but Bourke. I thought I had mentioned him to you, Edith. I am sure I ought to have done it, for I have found him a very pleasant companion." Hearing that, Edith immediately began to take to her father's new friend. She was more anxious to make atonement for her ill-considered ejaculation by excessive civility to Mr. Bourke. Alice was by no means so placable. She felt sure she never could like this stupid man, who was always getting in the way just when he was not wanted.

"A captain in the 110th," Mr. Boycott proceeded to

explain; "his *depôt* is at Chatham. He found his way across to Rufford's. Julia, — Madame de Chaillot is staying with her father, by the way, and she had known him abroad. One night I met him at dinner there, and persuaded him to come over and look at Barham Park. He's a great man for sketching—always at it—and went wild about some of the oaks by Hutton's cottage. He could make but a short stay there, for he had only leave for a couple of days, but I easily prevailed on him to come back, and here he has been since Wednesday last. He knows I am delighted to have him; and I really don't know that he has any immediate idea of leaving," added the poor Squire, looking the very picture of penitence.

"I am sure after all you tell us of him, I, for one, hope he has not," exclaimed his daughter. "I am quite certain I shall like any one who gets on well with you," she added, placing her hand in her father's. The Squire squeezed it and looked hard into her truthful eyes.

"Well, darling, it is a load off my mind to think poor Bourke won't spoil your visit, and you must do your best to convert Alice and your husband. I am sure Bourke won't trouble any one—the simplest fellow in the world in his ways, although one of the best companions I ever met—always ready to talk about anything. Willing to learn, too, when he can't teach, which, to do him justice, is very seldom, as far as I am concerned. South-downs and short-horns he did not know much about, until I took him in hand. As for horses, there he is quite able to hold his own, either with me or your father, Dick."

"There he has the advantage of me, sir, as you know. I always knock under for the sake of a quiet

life. Well, I don't know what Edith or Miss Dacre say, but I'm delighted at the prospect of meeting him." Reason the more for Edith being prepossessed in favour of her father's guest. She had always a remorseful impression that her husband might be boring himself at Barham, and would feel greatly relieved to know him with a companion he liked. So Alice saw herself abandoned by those who should have shared her prejudices, and was constrained to declare with hypocritical eyes and tongue the pleasure she felt at making the acquaintance of this agreeable Captain Bourke.

"No relation, I suppose, of our old acquaintance?" inquired Rufford.

"Upon my word, Dick, I don't know. It never occurred to me to ask him. You see I don't know, Mr. Bourke—your one, I mean—very well myself."

"A relation, I am quite sure," whispered Edith to Alice, as they sat over their tea-cups. The children, bread-and-butter and cake devouring, were sprawling about their laps. The gentlemen were talking unsociably remote in the bay-window.

"How you do jump to conclusions, dear, and from nowhere and nothing in particular."

"From nowhere and nothing? Why, do you not see his nose, and his mouth, and his eyes? Have you not looked at him?"

Alice had looked at him, and had no hesitation in owning it.

"Yes, I have looked at him, although apparently not so much as you, dear."

A man well over the middle height, with good features and better figure, little that was handsome in his face, but a pleasant, open expression that went some way towards making it so; full clear grey eyes that

seemed to indicate sufficient play of thought behind them: a broad forehead, a chin too square for beauty, that might have seemed harsh had it not been softened by the pleasant neighbourhood of a lip that seemed to tremble on the laugh. Alice had looked him over, and had rapidly inventoried his features, as any one who is much in the way of meeting fresh faces in changing society does instinctively. Your companion at the dinner-table for the next hour or two, even your partner in the dance of the next few minutes, naturally interests you. It rests with him or her to make an appreciable portion of this fleeting existence pleasant, or the reverse. Yet the family resemblance to an old friend had not struck her especially till Edith called her attention to particular features.

"As you say, Edith, he is not so unlike what dear old Mr. Bourke might have been, although Mr. Bourke must have been far better looking. Not so like, though, but what any resemblance of looks and manner might be coincidence or imagination. I shall ask him when he deigns to come this way. I don't suppose his family or connections need be a mystery, for he is clearly a gentleman."

Captain Bourke very soon did come that way, and gave her the opportunity. He was too fond of the bright things of this life to prefer the men and the bay-window, even with his artistic tastes, and the Kentish Park thrown in, to the attractive group on the sofa. The ice broken, the chat became pleasant enough. Edith Rufford was delighted with her new acquaintance's discriminative admiration of all she had loved the best in her girlhood.

"Well, Mrs. Rufford, you ought to know, and, besides, Mr. Boycott thinks with you. He and I have

already fought the matter more than once, without either claiming a victory, or, at least, acknowledging a defeat. But I persist in maintaining I like the peep over the weald from the old thorn-tree by the gable of the keeper's cottage, better than either of the others. Is it possible you have forgotten the natural arch of the old ivy-wreathed oak-boughs on the lower slope opposite, with the square tower of Framlingham Church rising over the blue woods against the downs in the distance. Yes, I don't say the vista seen through the columns of that gallery of Scotch firs is not grand, but, to my mind, it is tainted by the artificial: too like art pressed in to the aid of nature, and the wide stretch of country in the middle distance mars the effect."

After that, Edith succumbed at once. It was love at first speech, if not at first sight, as she took an early opportunity of confessing to her husband. While she and Bourke were discussing the beauties of Barham, Bourke's eyes looking occasional references to Miss Dacre, without succeeding in drawing her into the conversation, Miss Dacre, on her side, was furtively perusing his features, and her speculations were flitting about curiously among the lower branches of his possible family tree. Obeying the promptness of her abstracted thoughts rather than the strict laws of courtesy, she put the question that was troubling her rather abruptly.

Bourke looked sufficiently put out to show her she had been indiscreet.

"His nephew," he answered, dryly.

"Oh, indeed! Mr. Bourke is a very old friend of ours."

Captain Bourke showed neither enthusiasm nor pleasure at the announcement, nor did he take advantage of this opening to rush into a friendship with the pretty

girl who made it for him. On the contrary, he turned from the subject with what, in the circumstances, was almost awkward abruptness, and was punished by the visible change in Miss Dacre's looks and demeanour. Something like a bleak March cloud passed over features that had beamed out like a bright April morning, at hearing him own himself so near a kinsman. If Mrs. Rufford had not come to the rescue, the situation would have been serious. As it was, the young man felt he had excited prejudice where he would very much sooner have provoked sympathy, nor did matters mend as the day went on. The worst of it was, there were no symptoms of the feeling being evanescent. He made himself quickly at home with all the rest of the party. They found him no restraint upon the family life, and showed him as much. Rufford struck up a close alliance with him offhand. Lord Wharfdale, when he arrived next day, looked and spoke approval; as to Mrs. Rufford, she yielded herself entirely to the charm of his manner, and cast herself with her children into his arms. But Alice Dacre continued to *boulder* him, and bear him malice. She was too staunch in her likings to desert an old friend who had won her by a long course of kindness. She had conjured up the idea of a family feud, thrust herself into it with the ardour of her years and feelings, assumed impulsively that her devoted old admirer, Mr. Bourke, must have all the rights in it, and the stranger all the wrongs.

No one of the family did more to make Bourke feel thoroughly at home in it than Madame la Comtesse de Chaillot, *née* Julia Rufford. He was her *protégé*; hers by right of capture and first occupation, as the civil lawyers say; and she assumed an air of affectionate

property in him that was less gratifying than it should have been. Among other things, Madame de Chaillot was his senior by a full dozen of years, and Bourke, at twenty-five, was at once too old and too young to feel so flattered by her devotion as he might otherwise have done. Although preserved by an excellent constitution, by a strong mind kept in pretty regular occupation, and by an unimpeachable digestion, Madame de Chaillot quite looked her years, while her manners already were entering on a green old age. Natural good taste presided at bewitching toilettes where simplicity had still a good deal to say, thanks to her English birth and breeding. Yet her dress was belied by her air, and her style was distinctly demoralized by the Parisian, and the debased Parisian of the lower Empire. Left a widow some eight months before, she did not pretend to be overborne by her bereavement, nor did she redden her fine eyes by weeping over the urn of the departed Count. The marriage had been arranged by her own wayward will, and for once she had taken her way in spite of her plain interest, and in the face of her uncle's outspoken objections. Her father, after prudently suggesting that she had better do nothing without her uncle's approval, had left her to herself as usual, and Lord Wharfdale, who knew by experience the tenacious stubbornness of her will, had soon withdrawn an opposition that would have been fruitless. There had been no objection to raise on the score of family. M. de Chaillot's ancestors had followed the oriental misfortunes of Philip Augustus and St. Louis, and such of them as had come safe home, lay with crossed legs by the dozen in the sequestered abbey of Beaupré. There had been nothing precisely against M. de Chaillot, and, considering his scanty

means, it was creditable to his ingenuity that he had managed to pass his earlier years in a life of the luxurious bordering on the stormy. Then his story had become very much that of our friend De Rocheguyon, whom we met long years before dining with Asgill and Gaboche at Philippe's. Bought dear by the Empire, the matrimonial connection he had formed had proved an excellent investment in every way, and had given high satisfaction in court circles. Mated, De Chaillot and his wife had winged a brilliant flight in the fullest and finest feather. The friends of Cæsar, they had made themselves friends with Mammon as well and in the circles of high finance, where their blue blood and stately manners proved invaluable. Now her husband's premature death had left the Countess with a number of influential acquaintances of one sort or another, and a fortune to all appearance ample for her wants. Meantime, she had withdrawn for a space from the gay world she had shone in, and come over to visit her father, not in obedience to any very pressing summons.

"Julia seems exceedingly well left, sir," remarked the younger Mr. Rufford to the venerable Rector. The old gentleman and his daughter had come over to spend the day in the old fashion at the hall. "How on earth did De Chaillot make the money? I dare say they had a good going income, but I should have thought them the very last people to save."

"She has her settlement, Dick."

"The 500*l.* a year my uncle gave her."

"True. As my brother came forward as the head of the family, I did not feel called upon," returned the Rector, as if the recollection came on him as something of a surprise.

"And the Count contributed nothing, if I remember right. Nothing at least but himself and his brains. I was trustee under my sister's settlements, you know, and, to do him justice, he made her tolerably happy while he lived, and has left her rich to all appearance now he is gone. I am not curious, generally, but really, sir, I feel, as her brother, that I ought to know how her money comes to her."

"Perhaps you may be right, Dick. You had better ask her, then."

"I have asked her, and she laughed and told me they had enjoyed an excellent income for years, with very simple tastes; that they had been lucky in investing their savings, and that in fact, although she might have enough to scrape along upon, it was absurd to call so modest a competency anything but genteel poverty. In short, although perfectly good-humoured, she made it plain she would not be cross-examined—by me, at least."

"Better ask her uncle. Perhaps my brother knows. He used to see something of them in Paris from time to time."

It was plain the Rector had no idea of interfering in his daughter's matters, and indeed his son never expected it of him. Lord Wharfdale, questioned in turn, could throw little light on the subject. He, too, had been surprised to find his niece left in circumstances so flourishing.

"Can't say I'm sure, Dick. It does astonish me, I confess, for, although I knew De Chaillot speculated, and, I suppose, won, I should have thought them just the people to lavish what they made and more. I can only imagine he made heavier hauls than I believed, and had more prudence than I gave him credit for."

But since she married against my entreaties, all I know is that she has never once asked me for money, although nothing would have been more natural considering her home was in my house for so long. It was hard work, you remember, persuading her pride to accept the small settlement I made, but then I suspect the sound French common sense of M. de Chaillot was brought delicately into play. Since then, the only time I gave her a cheque in memory of old times, she made the taking it so much a matter of favour, that I dared not repeat it. So you see, although I may be curious for Julia's own sake, I really feel great delicacy in interfering."

Rufford was silent for a few moments. "I wish she had never married that confounded Frenchman."

"So do I, Dick, devoutly. I do now as I did then. The more she tries to be as she used to be, the more you feel how far she's changed. I believe myself the life they led in that set over there would play the mischief with an angel, and I wish to heaven we could see her break with the whole thing, take a fancy to a sensible Englishman, and marry him."

"Well, uncle, I would say as much to no one but yourself, but, between ourselves, I should be very sorry for the Englishman."

Lord Wharfdale sighed, shrugged his shoulders, and shook his head. He could not contradict his nephew, and he could not forget the days, not so very distant, when he had loved his niece as a daughter, and never dreamed of her treating him otherwise than as a father.

CHAPTER IV.

*THE LADY, THE CAITIFF, AND THE
CHAMPION.*

THE party had been three days at Barham, and day after day Captain Bourke had been prevailed upon to prolong his stay, each day pledging himself to nothing more than the morrow. The Squire's hospitality was pressing and unfeigned.

"Come, Bourke, you see how very glad we are all to have you, and you seem happy enough yourself. I'm sure the general commanding don't care for your company half so much as we do. Speak out like a man, put us out of this constant anxiety, and say at once you'll give us another fortnight."

But that Bourke would not do. He insisted that he was the victim of circumstances; had he listened to the harsh voice of duty, he ought to have rejoined ere now. The truth was, he ought to have gone, and would have gone. He felt he was trespassing on the good nature of his friendly chief. But he remained, considerably worried in mind and painfully drawn in opposite directions. When Madame de Chaillot laid her commands on him to stay, with an affectation of seductive playfulness and an air of proprietorship she scarcely cared to conceal, then he fancied claws under the petticoats, and felt almost irresistibly impelled to go. When Alice coldly kept him at the full length of her pretty arm then he yielded to the fascination of her forbidding manner and lingered on, with some vague idea of triumphing over her prepossessions. And so he

might have gone on indefinitely, although generally his nature was far from an undecided one, had not accident come to his aid. Fortunately the primary causes of the age of chivalry are gone—the giants and the dragons,—the bandit nobles and other picturesque ornaments of the mythical and middle ages that we can very well spare; yet still, under our reign of law, social savagery and his fortunate star may lend a would-be knight-errant a helping hand on occasion.

Bourke had come back one afternoon from a flying visit to his quarters at Chatham. He had gone thither ostensibly on regimental business he could not defer. So far it was the case that his errand was to report himself, and obtain a license that might leave him his master for a few days, free to regulate his movements as he pleased. In that he succeeded, thanks to the friendly good nature of his superior, and he came back accordingly in excellent spirits.

“I need not offer you lunch, Captain, I suppose,” said the butler, who was there to receive him hospitably in the hall. “Will you have a glass of sherry, sir, or madeira, or ale, or what?”

“Three full hours to dinner, and it was a frightfully hot ride: the ale, Bagster, by all means—your own particular. Where are they all?” he demanded when the butler had fetched him the frothing tankard.

“Mr. and Mrs. Rufford went over to the Rectory; the Squire, he went out an hour, or it might be an hour-and-a-quarter, ago, somewhere about the farm, I fancy—I really can’t say exactly where.”

Captain Bourke set down the tankard between pulls and drew a long breath with an air of satisfaction. The Persiennes were down outside the open windows; there

was a cool reflection of a bright sun from the red-brown gravel; a balmy carnation-laden air came breathing in, and set the feather-grass waving in the vases on the drawing-room table. The soft sofa, where Miss Dacre's work was thrown aside by the open book she had been pretending to read, looked very tempting. Captain Bourke felt a Sybaritic sense of tender languor come stealing over him. "I think, Bagster, it's hardly worth my while going after him: I've had a longish morning's work, and I'm pretty sure to miss him. Miss Dacre went to the Rectory with Mrs. Rufford, I suppose?"

"Beg your pardon, Captain, I quite forgot Miss Dacre. No, Captain; Miss Dacre stayed at home. I heard her say she wanted to finish a sketch somewhere in the heronry-wood."

"Indeed! Well, Bagster, if you leave me the beer I dare say I shall manage to make myself tolerably comfortable." But although Bourke cast himself down on the sofa he had eyed so affectionately he did not recline there long. He got up, sat down again, rose, lounged to the staircase, began to mount it leisurely, and ended by covering the last steps two at a time; went to his room to make himself comfortable, as he soliloquized to himself, and ended by paying very considerable attention to his toilette; descended, finished the beer, took his stick and wideawake and went out, not towards the farm-buildings, not towards the meadows where the young heifers were, or the field where the red wheat, in which the Squire took so profound an interest, was ripening. The way to these lay across the glowing gravel and the shadeless lawn, while the path that plunged into the shrubberies on the other side and led to the umbrageous avenue that skirted the

kitchen-garden, seemed far more tempting. Rather a mistake following it, after all, from the anti-tropical point of view: it led out upon the bare slope of sun-scorched park that rolled upwards towards the heronry-wood. After all, there might be more air stirring on the height, and, as he had come so far, he might just as well go on. Spite of the heat, it was very pleasant as he mounted: glimpses into a swelling champagne country, where the greyer green of the woods broke into the fresher green of the corn-fields; where many-coloured kine grazed drowsily among untrimmed hedge-rows that meandered purposelessly about irregular enclosures; down upon the many-gabled roofs of farms, and away to the lanterned towers of more than one distant church.

Still, with all the laughing beauties of the open country, the noble beech-wood before him wooed him invitingly to its shadow. Everything within it was so silent: not a note from its cool shades but the twitter of a blackbird, that should have meant rain, had he not been so flatly contradicted by the dry warmth of the air, and the cloudless glow of the heavens. A heron, with long, drooping legs, floating swift and spirit-like towards the sombre glades on the noiseless flap of its down-lined pinions, was in absolute keeping with the drowsy tranquility of the scene. There was but one objection to his plunging in. He remembered now, his ally, Mr. Bagster, had told him that Miss Dacre was sketching somewhere there. Nothing could well be more awkward than seeming to intrude on her retirement; nothing, indeed, more disagreeable for him, considering the uneasy terms of hostile neutrality on which they observed each other. Well, there, in the shade was a forest-road, deep-grooved by the wheels of

timber-carts; in the shade cast by the gnarled limbs of the beeches, chequered cheerfully here and there by the stray sunlight that struggled its way through. His ill fortune might lead him near the ambushed sketcher, but clearly he could give no reasonable offence by sticking to that. So he followed it, keeping the bright look-out of an intelligent observer for woodland sights. It was probably the cool change from sun to shade that made him step out more quickly. Rural life was very much in siesta. There were few sights, and not many sounds. The coo of the ringdove from the leaves; the jabber of the jackdaw from the hollow trunks of some secular thorn; now and again the scamper of a scared squirrel over the carpet of last year's withered beech-leaves as it scrambled to its refuge up the smooth brown stems, and, with its bright eyes, observed him, half-reassured from behind the branch it clung by.

A sharp dip among a brake of holly and blackthorn, a sharper turn, and a fresh vista, leading straight to the park pales, the rustic ladder and the old-fashioned stile that topped them, and nothing human visible in it. With something that might have passed for an ejaculation of disappointment Bourke quickened his steps, and, at a pace like that of a man who has set his mind on an object, his keen eyes busying themselves to the right and left, soon reached the stile. Arrived there, with a second exclamation, something more distinct than the other, he mounted the ladder, took his seat on the handrail of the stile, and proceeded to embrace the country in a rapid survey.

It might well have pleased him more than it seemed to do. A bit of breezy common, of thick stubbly turf, broken here and there by dense clumps of natural shrubbery, lightened by the flush of the dog-roses,

interwoven with the wild convolvulus, and festooned with the traveller's joy; here and there an abandoned gravel-pit, its steep sides honeycombed by rabbits, its hanging edge fringed with the drooping furze-bushes that were nibbled and gnawed everywhere else into undesigned imitations of the trim vagaries of a Dutch garden; a clump or two of wind-blown, weather-beaten fir-trees; an abandoned windmill in picturesque decay; a hut of turf, that might have been run up by some lawless squatter; and, beyond, all, a wider prospect of wood and weald than had delighted him below—a bolder and more sweeping outline of downs girdling the distant horizon.

Small admiration, to tell the truth, did Philip Bourke bestow on what would have charmed his senses at another time; but he had the soul of an artist, and every artist knows how the effect of a bit of warm colour adds to a mass of neutral tones.

Among the various greens, and greys, and browns, and hazy blues Bourke's eyes had caught the distant flutter of scarlet. It awakened certain associations and some little curiosity. Surely, if he was not mistaken, a light shawl of scarlet gauze was Alice Dacre's favourite out-of-door wear, and very well, as he had been constrained to own, did it become her in contrast with her rich brown hair and fair complexion, and bright morning muslin dress. Instinctively he rose to his feet on the broad top step of the lofty stile. Miss Dacre it was—and Miss Dacre was clearly *aux prises* with one of the groups of firs and the windmill, and profoundly abstracted she appeared to be in her task.

Industry is always a charming object, especially to an idle man of industrious aspirations, and Bourke became speedily as deeply engrossed in the artist as the

artist in her study. Whether or when he would have broken the spell of suspense and gone boldly up to her, we know not. We know he had been apprehensive of seeming to intrude by stumbling on her accidentally in the wood, and now, thanks to the open position she had selected, he could only approach her honestly of set purpose. True, he might stalk her, and stumble upon her with an apology. The most wary game may be stalked in the open if its attention, for the moment, chance to be effectually distracted: but then there is always the risk of its turning to bay. However, fortune had decided to relieve Bourke from his hesitation, and, as good or ill-luck would have it, Alice's privacy was broken in upon, although not by him.

The crimson shawl gleamed from the edge of one of the frequent gravel tracks that cut up the common—but a slight take-off to the comfortable sense of solitude with which she sketched. For not once in the twenty-four hours was it likely to be travelled by human foot, and then, most probably, by one of the Squire's keepers or woodmen. The track in question emerged abruptly from the sharp dip of the hill beyond her. For some time Bourke had been listening to faint sounds that he would have found it impossible to trace to their cause, had he cared to take the trouble. Now they drew slowly nearer, and gradually attached themselves in his mind to a pair of ill-made wheels, guiltless of oil, and taxed to their utmost. Alice's attention had been attracted too, as well it might, for they were very much nearer to her than him. He saw her lay down the hand with the brush, and look over her shoulder. They had not to wait long. The creaking soon found a jarring accompaniment of hoofs grinding and rasping painfully in heavy gravel, while blending in fitting harmony rose a

rough voice appealing to the unhappy beast in the shafts in language that sounded much more like menace than encouragement. Bourke was on the point of hastening forward, when he saw the young lady change her seat slightly, and move aside under shelter of a furzebush. Doubtless she hoped to be passed unobserved, so he paused, and waited, and watched.

First came into sight the crown of a skin cap, then the tips of a pair of hairy ears,—the one did not belong to the other,—gradually a rude cart with a tarpaulin cover, drawn by a rough shambling beast, half pony, half horse. The animal was woefully out of condition now, probably it had never come nearer condition than envying it; in the course of a long unchequered life of misfortune. By the beast's side came a man in much better case, to judge by the broad shoulders and burly figure he showed against the sky-line. Later, when Bourke had an opportunity of studying them nearer, he decided that the pony on the whole had a more prepossessing appearance than his master.

Now, had Alice been seated anywhere but on the very brow of the ridge, she might have merely heard this pleasant travelling company, and they need have seen nothing of her. But, having placed herself on the top of one of the steepest pitches anywhere in the home counties, naturally it was otherwise. The traveller growled "woa—something you," to his beast, a command the animal had naturally anticipated, and stood with dilated nostrils, heaving flanks, and one of its legs resting on the sand on the tip of one shoeless foot, making desperate efforts to recover the wind, of which the supply at best was so scanty.

By way of friendly encouragement, the merchant of brooms—for that was the master's calling—raised one

heavily clamped foot, and caught his dumb companion a friendly kick before the belly-band. It made him wince his only available hind leg out from beneath him, sent him half on his haunches, and let the cart commence retracing the road it had just dragged up. More oaths, of coarse—oaths so hearty and so recklessly chosen, that they drew a faint remonstrance from a woman lying under the tilt, and an audible exclamation of mingled terror and horror from Alice behind the bushes. But it's an ill wind that blows no one good, and if the exclamation betrayed Alice, it saved the broom-merchant's wife and pony.

"Ulloh, who 'as we year?" ejaculated that truculent worthy, as he plunged into the furze in the direction of the sound, and found himself face to face with the young lady, whose pale face and scared eyes belied her frantic efforts to seem unconcerned. "Ulloh, young marm! and what might you be a doin' of now? Arter no good, I'll be bound, if you aint arter no harm. A sketchin' wos you,"—with a gesture of profound contempt—"and that's the way as things is squared in this year blessed life. My missus has to go on the tramp in all kind o' weathers, and rub her fingers down to the stump a tyin' o' besoms, while yer sort turns out shiny as pewter pots, to go a messin' over scraps o' paper. Well, then, 'and over, will yer, and let's 'ave a look," he proceeded, in a tone of injury, as if she ought to have anticipated his request, poising himself with the air of a conscientious art critic, decided beforehand to be severely judicial.

Alice cast a swift glance round her; how she would have delighted now to see some signs of human life in the solitude she had been revelling in a few minutes before. Then she submitted her work with a trembling

hand. "It's not quite finished, sir," she explained deprecatingly.

The wild-caught amateur deigned no answer, but suspended judgment, as he knit his bushy eyebrows in the effort to set his untutored critical faculties in motion.

"When you was a drawin' o' the windmill, you might 'a been and put it in repair a bit; it wouldn't 'a cost yer much, that wouldn't."

In the sense of relief at the broom-man being apparently inclined to place their interview on a friendly footing, Alice became nervously expansive. "You see, sir, I've drawn it just as it is, and it looks prettier that way."

Alas. She had jarred a chord that vibrated to deep-set conscientious principle in the broom-man's nature. As his previous remarks indicated, he felt strongly on the subject of social inequalities, and objected to the monopoly of the blessings of existence enjoyed by a luxurious aristocracy.

"Now I tell yer what it is, young 'ooman, now I knows yer." And he drew himself up in grave moral dignity. "It's you as goes a settin' on the poor and a-grindin' of them down into the gutters. It's you who goes a cuttin' down their wages and a scrimpin' o' their wittals, and a-stoppin' o' their beer, till they gets as lean as a coster's donkey, and has to keep a hichin' on to their rags to prevent a slippin' out o' them. It's you as goes a shovin' o' them into places where yer wouldn't keep yer rabbits, and a scroogin' o' them together wuss than the inside o' a cask o' herrins. And the raggeder they is, and the dirtier they get, and the leaner they grows, the jollier it is and the better you likes it, 'cos' they looks pretty. Pretty—y-a-a-a-h!" and the orator ground

out the epithet he took such exception to with intense viciousness. Regarding Alice as the embodiment of the aristocracy he abhorred, he scowled fearfully upon her in honest malignity of indignation. Moreover, in his excitement he emphasised his words and looks with an appropriate movement of his arm which came naturally to him. To do him justice it was only intended for rhetorical effect. But Alice never doubted he meant a blow, and the gesture wrung a shrill little cry of agonised alarm from her galloping heart, as she shrunk down below the shadow of the grimy pit.

The look and the cry recalled the broom-merchant from the political stump he had mounted on to the bit of common where he stood. He seemed to remember his righteous wrath had run away with him, and that the frightened girl before him was the mere symbol of a vicious class and an atrocious system. It is probable he meant to apologise, reassure her, to send her on her way, or leave her to herself. But a double interruption came to give a fresh impulse to his excited feelings. His wife, at Alice's cry, got down painfully from under the tilt of the cart—she was evidently suffering from illness—and as he turned to chastise her ill-timed interference, he found himself face to face with Bourke.

That same second he felt himself caught by the coloured cotton handkerchief that was knotted loosely round his hairy throat, and sent spinning violently against the wheel of his cart, with a hearty "Out of the way, you ruffian!"

Another second and Bourke had passed his arm instinctively round the trembling Alice, whose limbs and courage fairly failed her now that she saw the arrival of help. He lowered her gently on to the grass, with a

hastily whispered, "Don't be afraid, Miss Dacre; believe me you are as safe as in the drawing-room at Barham," and then, quickly picking himself up, turned swiftly, prepared for the worst.

Not swiftly enough had the broom-man chosen to use his advantage. Pausing a moment after his collision with the cart-wheel to toss back an oath in the direction of his wife, and bring down his fist on his horse's ragged quarters, he had still the time to have struck a decisive blow from behind as Bourke bent over Miss Dacre.

His chest was pitched forward, and his arm drawn back, and then he dropped it by his side, as he proceeded to strip his open jacket and his neckhandkerchief, and to knot the latter firm round his loins as he went on to dispense with his braces.

"You took me unawares, young man, but I sees no call for my doin' the same by you. All meanness be blowed, and fair play all the world over, says I. So strip, if you means to; chuck your tile into the ring, and let's be at it with a will."

Bourke looked his man over, although he seemed in no haste to follow his example. An ugly-looking customer enough in point of shape and thews. Hard, heavy features that seemed as if they could stand hammering like an anvil, and show no signs of it; broad, square chest and shoulders; a ponderous pair of arms well set on, ending in formidable bone and horn; and a pair of solid legs in all respects worthy of the upper works—legs that the owner would take a deal of knocking off.

"If he has the faintest glimmer of the science, I'm done," he said to himself. The suppressed fury at the outrage offered to Miss Dacre was nourished

with fresh fuel as he looked at the state she had been reduced to. So the chivalrous bearing of his enemy had no concern in the preternaturally calm tone in which he addressed him. That was due to the feeling that she was in a very awkward predicament from which only extreme coolness on his part could extricate her.

"Certainly," he said, with great apparent suavity. "Just give the lady a few minutes time to come to herself, and let us see her to the nearest cottage, and then I'm your man." But the broom-man's was a chivalry that did not understand artificial refinements.

"Come, I likes that. I knows you, the sort of cove that drops on to a man from behind, wen he ain't a lookin', and then slopes off to crow about behind his back. As for the young 'ooman, she ain't no better flesh nor blood nor mine," and the insolence of assuming that she could be again irritated the broom-man's pet prejudice; "so ——, come on, and no more gammon, unless you wants me to come at you."

Still Bourke made not the slightest motion towards removing his coat, and his antagonist took a step with menacing gesture, but stopped again. As he looked in the bloated aristocrat's eye, he could not trace the faintest sign of fear. "—— you then, does you mean fighting or does you not?" he growled, in evident embarrassment.

"Fighting, certainly, and as much as you please. But not till you've let me put the lady out of the way. You see what a state you've put her in with your infernal——." And as Bourke glanced round at her, he looked "ugly" too, as the Yankees say, quite ugly enough to make the broom-man pretty certain he had no idea whatever of baulking him.

"Well, then, just promise you'll come back all

right, and yer may take her. But it's honour bright, mind."

"Honour bright."

"And don't you keep me waiting too long neither; my time's worth browns to me, which is more nor yourn is, I fancies."

The dialogue latterly had been carried on in undertones, and Alice, who knew nothing of what had passed, was overjoyed when her champion, stooping to assist her to rise, assured her they were at liberty to go.

"Let us begone at once," she exclaimed, jumping to her feet. "No, no, I am strong, quite strong; how nicely you must have managed the ruffian, dear Captain Bourke."

"Yes, she said 'dear;'" he remarked it. It was a pity she was not mistress of herself or her words."

After a few steps, however, she was content to accept his arm. The merchant of brooms looked, and then called after them. He was beckoning to Bourke, who, in spite of Alice's remonstrances, thought it prudent to go back, and hear what his challenger had to say.

"Jest you say yer sorry for having laid your hand on me; and by——I'll tell you what it is, you may go with her, and I don't care if I never claps eyes on neither of you again."

It was foolish of Captain Bourke, but he had long been crushing back his temper by most desperate efforts, and the other's language was not picked precisely so as to make the well-meant proposal pleasant to him.

"I'll see you——. What I mean to say is this: rely on it, my good friend, I'll be back as quickly as I can manage it, and if I don't find you, take my word for it, I'll follow you till I do."

CHAPTER V.

THE COMBAT.

ONCE out of danger, Alice quickly recovered strength and spirits, and began to be rather ashamed of her apprehensions. She was even generous enough to make apologies for her assailant. After all, he might not have meant much. His manners were rough certainly, but he might never have intended to strike her; indeed, now she came to think of it, she did not believe he did. "Strike her," Bourke's Irish blood boiled up again, and as his thoughts rushed back with him to the common, he positively felt his fair companion an incumbrance. He declined at last to discuss the matter farther, in the fear he might employ language unfitting for her ears. Alice perhaps would have forgiven him a good deal in that war. For, although she affected to extenuate the outrage, none the less had she inclined her ear to hear Bourke vehemently denounce it. She seemed inclined to cling to her protector, not literally, although she laid a firm hold on his arm. Alas, for her consistency, and her constancy a partisan. Her companion was the same man, whose fancied behaviour to her old friend she had chosen to resent vindictively. Now gratitude had for the moment blotted out the recollection of the crimes she had insisted on laying to his charge.

In spite of all, with his late enemy busily at work paving the way to grateful friendship, Bourke was anything but at ease, and he moved with hesitating step along the opening she made him. Accustomed to see

her advances met very much more than half way, Alice at any other time would have resented his distraction and reluctance. She would have been indignant, when her protector almost uncourteously insisted on getting rid of her, on the appearance of Mr. Boycott's bailiff in his gig, urging what was very true, that she was in no condition to walk to the house.

"He need not have been so pleased to see that tiresome man," was what she dared scarcely think to herself. "But there is no place for you, Captain Bourke," was what she said aloud.

"If the Captain would get in and drive miss," civilly suggested Mr. Greystoke the bailiff, plucking at his hat, and giving a graceful backward scrape at the gravel with his leg. Miss Dacre could not pretend to answer for the Captain, but she looked at him. And the Captain somewhat to her surprise, we will not say her disappointment, abruptly declined Mr. Greystoke's disinterested offer. So Miss Dacre suffered herself to be assisted into the gig, with a fervour of grateful expression that said a great deal for her temper and her gratitude.

Captain Bourke disposed her flowing muslin skirts under the apron with a luxury of care and tenderness that that same gratitude of her's delighted to dwell on, as she was driven down the avenue, with the blushing Mr. Greystoke striving his best to make conversation. The Captain lounged objectlessly after them, till the hanging boughs of the thorns at the turn concealed the occupants of the gig from him, and left him consequently master of his actions. Then it was promptly, right-about-face, quick march, double,—and cutting straight across the park to the palisades well to the left of the stile, he breasted the hill in a style that

augured well for his wind and training. But, because he was in good wind, that was no reason for his wasting it, and so it struck him, as taking counsel with his prudence he slackened his pace. He reached the pales, swung himself on to the top of them by the help of a handy branch; balanced there for a moment, and dropped quietly on to the common.

The man of brooms marked his enemy's advent from a distance. As he had observed, "his time was browns." He had no special soul for scenery. So he was rather irritated at having to kick his heels on the hill, with no more profitable occupation than making snap practice with strong oaths at the precious moments as they went flying past him. However, although a poor man, he preferred excitement even to gain and honest labour, and his brow cleared and his mien brisked up as he smelt the battle from very near. He was almost civil as he nodded to the Captain, and once more rolled himself out of the jacket he had resumed.

Bourke on his side wasted no time in an exchange of courtesies. He began to peel deliberately, while the lady of the vagabond watched the proceeding critically; her widening eyeballs betraying more concern for the comparatively slight-made aristocrat than her burly husband. His preparations completed, Bourke proceeded to toe the scratch. Then the other broke the silence, speaking with an easy something that smacked of superiority.

"Beg parding, sir, but I thinks I knows a thing or two, and I've been looking about a bit. There's a nicish bit of ground over there jest where she was a-sittin'," and he jerked his grubby thumb over his brawny shoulder.

Bourke nodded and walked in the direction indicated.

The broom-man was civil certainly, but he wanted tact. For the life of him, after this allusion to "she," Bourke could not reciprocate the courtesy he recognised, and yet he felt painfully that the unlicked vagabond had the decided advantage of him in chivalry.

"If you sets your face to the windmill, while I faces you, the sun'll be right atween us. Kim along with the bucket and the sponge, she'll see fair both on us. Polly and mind you looks to yer countin' afore you hollers 'time.'" And he ground his hands together, in his irrepressible satisfaction at the preparations. It must be owned his generosity may have sprung in some measure from a respectful contempt for the plucky feebleness of the other man. "You won't object to shake hands afore we sets to." He suited the action to the proposal, and Bourke's long white finger locked the broom-man's horny bunch of stumpy fives. The touch fully confirmed the measure Bourke had taken of it with his eye, and might have shaken a less resolute spirit.

"Look out, my friend."

If we had the martial genius of Homer, the fluent command of technicalities of a reporter for "*Bell*," we might presume to chronicle the details of the combat. Failing these, we can merely indicate its course: the broom-man, exulting in the conscious luxury of overpowering strength; while the soldier, in the certainty that he must nurse his slight science to cope successfully with the brute force opposed to him, fought wide at first and very shy. They broke and feinted, and countered, without meaning to get home. But the sun was still hot, and the man of brooms, notwithstanding all the hard labour and hard living he grumbled at, had put on flesh. As he began to warm unpleasantly, he thought

he might just as well go in and finish out of hand the work cut out for him. Feinting with his right, and drawing his antagonist as he fondly hoped, he let out viciously with his mighty left. Bourke had never taken his quick eyes off those of the other. Anticipating the blow rather than following it, he lightly dodged it instead of throwing up a feeble guard. The easier done, that there was more of roundhand swing than straight delivery. Then quickly recovering as he rose, he sent in his left swift and clean from the shoulder, and caught the other a flush hit somewhere in the waste of cheek between the corner of the thick lips and the sandy whiskers. But an inch to one side, and he might have cut his knuckles open on a range of formidable tusks; as it was, his arm jarred to the elbow, but the big man reeled back a full couple of yards, and half swung himself round. Before he could recover, he had it again right and left straight between the eyes, and went down anything but smiling—cursing frightfully on the contrary.

The woman, terrified, although probably not unused to that sort of thing, ran forward to do the ministerings of an affectionate wife, and pick her husband up. Far more humbled than hurt, he received her spiriting anything but gently. "Blow the sponge!"—only he used a word a good deal stronger—"count, and be blowed to yer: didn't I tell yer yer wos to keep time between the rounds?"

In due time, "Time!" was stammered out, and up he came again, little the worse in body, very greatly so in temper. No science now. It was the blind rush of the chafed bull that meant in its brutal strength, to bear down all before it. The very wind of his blows sounded ugly. If one of them had gone home on the ear or the

temple, it might have not only decided the struggle of the day, but knocked Captain Bourke out of campaigning time for the future. The Captain scarcely attempted to guard: he merely hopped about like a parched-pea on a shovel. Lucky for him that he had developed his activity in an excellent school, and was the best racket-player in his regiment. Not that his hands were idle any more than his legs. They pattered about the broom-man's face like February hailstones on a plate-glass window, and with much the same effect. He dared not venture to too close quarters, and except for foaming at the mouth, and spluttering out execrations, the other showed slight signs of either distress or suffering. But for Bourke himself, he felt his breath going, and some of his confidence with it. Heaven knew how long they had been at it, but round the second seemed likely to last till he dropped.

"What! Can it be possible? Good God! Captain Bourke, what does all this mean?"

In the engrossing interest of the fight, neither the principals nor their common second had marked the approach of horsehoofs. Now they raised their blood-shot eyes, as the most unlooked-for interruption caused each to start back, and Bourke recognised in the horsemen Mr. Boycott, Lord Wharfdale, and one of the grooms from the Hall.

Excited as he was, he was perhaps by no means sorry for the unlooked-for suspension of hostilities. Relief, if he felt any, quickly vanished in the sense of shame at having been caught in so very ambiguous a position. Blush he could not, if he had tried his best. He was far too hot and flushed in the face for any such sign of refined feeling. As for the broom-man, whatever his inmost thoughts might have been, he knew

Mr. Boycott, and the voice of the magistrate acted on his rage like the touch of the collar on the neck of the bear broke loose. Shamefacedly, he proceeded to resume his jacket, mopping his face and brawny neck the while with the tie he tore away from his waist.

"Upon my word, Captain Bourke!" resumed the Squire; while, in wonder at the scandal of the whole proceeding his quiet gentlemanly friend had so strangely lent himself to, Lord Wharfdale sat silent on his horse, amusement gradually getting the better of the astonishment on his features, and the open-mouthed servant appropriately completed the group.

Philip Bourke recovered himself pretty quickly. He had naturally a good deal of self-possession; and, after all, although appearances must be strongly against him, he felt there had been nothing discreditable in his proceedings. Indeed, on second thoughts, he was more embarrassed on his enemy's account than his own. The magistrate was frowning magisterially on the vagabond, and when they came to learn the offence, man and magistrate would be down like a sledge-hammer on the ruffian who had outraged a cherished guest.

The Squire spoke the first, and addressed himself to the rough. "Now then, you sir, what have you to say for this brutal assault on a gentleman staying at Barham?"

"Brutal assault be blowed!" growled the broom-man, roused to wrath by the injustice of the accusation. "The fight wos a fair fight; ask him."

"Fair or foul, you rascal, what do you mean by getting fighting with this gentleman at all?"

"I knows you, Mr. Boycott, sir, and you knows me—leastways, we's met afore; but I knows you'd be the last genelman as would be down on a poor man for

defending on hisself. Wen a genelman lays a hand on me I lets him ave it if I can, wos he the Prince o' Wales or the parish constable."

Mr. Boycott turned for explanation to the other party to this action he had interrupted.

"The man frightened Miss Dacre, sir, and I interfered." He avoided the word insulted that he might repay the considerate courtesy of his late antagonist. The choler of the Squire was kindled.

"Insulted Miss Dacre? What, the devil, sir!"

The broom-man looked considerably taken aback. Like other combatants who dispose of forces on a more extensive scale, in the excitement of the subsequent struggle he had utterly forgotten the original cause. Then his features assumed a doggedly defiant expression. Driven to the wall, with the consciousness of a bad cause and nothing to say in his favour, the "mill" looming before him in the distance, there was nothing for it but to stand grimly at bay. He thought of a bolt, but its penalty would have been leaving his lady and his household goods in the hands of the enemy. He just cast one furtive glance at Bourke, then rivetted his eyes on the square-clumped toe that was scraping the gravel.

Bourke stepped up to the Squire and whispered something. The Squire looked surprised and waved him off somewhat impatiently. Bourke whispered again. This time the Squire lent himself to listen, and called up Lord Wharfdale to the conclave.

"Well, as you say all this, Bourke, and if you really make a personal favour of it, I suppose for this one time—eh, my lord? Hark ye here, my friend, it's my own private opinion that three months of Maidstone Gaol would do you a world of good, and you never came

so near having a spell of free quarters and honest employment in your life."

The culprit raised his head, and a faint grin lighted his rough features like a farthing candle flickering behind the grimy glass of a garret window. He knew he was all right now.

"But," continued the Squire, after pausing to mark the impression that was not produced,—“But, in consideration of the intercession of the gentleman you wished to injure I am content for this once to overlook your rascally conduct; and I hope it's the last time I shall hear of you about Barham, for depend upon it the police shall have strict orders to keep an eye on you.”

“Blowed if the gentleman I wished to hinjure, as you calls it, can't take jolly good care of hisself, and come jolly nigh hurting o' other people in doing it. Lord love you, sir, I've no wish to go a-hinjuring of you agin—quite the contrary, you may pound it—and I wishes you a jolly good arternoon, and many o' them, and if ever I has the chance o' doin' you a good turn you may reckon on me; or the young woman either, for the matter o' that.”

Then, seeing from the sudden darkening of two of his hearers' faces, that he had ventured imprudently on delicate ground, the orator ceased, gave a pluck at his cap, drew the back of his hand across his mouth, and, with a friendly punch in his horse's ribs, began busying himself about its harness.

“May I ask, Captain Bourke, how long the battle had lasted when we most unluckily broke up the ring?”

“Quite long enough for me, I assure you, Lord Wharfdale,” rejoined Bourke, laughing, “my wind was all but gone. I suspect you just came up in time to save my credit—and my bones.”

"I don't know that, Bourke," said the Squire; "it should be long odds on a match when you throw a few stones in; but for myself, from what I saw, I'd have been inclined to bet on blood, skill, and the middle-weight."

"Honestly, then, I think you'd have picked the wrong man. My friend's steady perseverance must have been rewarded in the end. I could do nothing to hurt him, although I tried all I knew; and if he had got home once——"

"He hasn't hurt you, by the way, has he? God bless me, I quite forgot to ask; but, then, I saw none of the marks of his handiwork."

"Hurt me? not a bit: done me a world of good, I don't doubt. I don't know when I've had such a breathing. By the way, Mr. Boycott, I do trust you'll say nothing of all this at the Hall: as you may believe, I'm most heartily ashamed of the whole business."

"Now that is just what I will not promise: in the first place, because I never make promises I know I sha'n't keep; in the second, because, if Lord Wharfdale said nothing, we could never silence that fellow Jack—no, not under threat of instant dismissal. As it is quite sure to come upstairs from the servants' hall, we may just as well give the true version of the story to begin with."

And the Squire was jovially inexorable, much to Bourke's annoyance. What would the ladies think of him? how would Miss Dacre, with her refined mind and manners, feel to a man who had condescended to a brutal fight with a vulgar ruffian—who had gone back deliberately to brawl in cold blood. She couldn't possibly make allowances; and yet—and yet—it would be very ungrateful if she did not.

The Rev. Julian Rufford and Madame de Chaillot joined the dinner-party that evening at the Hall, and the Squire told the story of the battle with great gusto. Partly for Alice Dacre's sake, partly for that of the merchant of brooms, Bourke had made as little as possible of the unpleasant occurrence that had provoked his chivalry, and the distressed damsel herself shrank sensitively from that part of the subject. So the Squire's first anger had passed, and now he looked on the whole thing as an excellent joke. Bourke had found no opportunity for a private interview with Alice; but Mrs. Rufford good-naturedly detailed him to take her into dinner, and a stammering commonplace whisper he breathed in her ear, as they passed along the corridor, was answered dumbly by a light pressure on the arm that he found eminently satisfactory. His face had been clouded and anxious as he led her out of the drawing-room; it was beaming when he took his seat by her side at the dinner-table. The change did not escape the sharp eyes of Madame de Chaillot, who had placed herself opposite. Well for him—and perhaps for Alice, too—that returning serenity had restored him the command of his faculties. He showed himself every whit as active in verbal skirmish as in his fight with the broom-man on the common, and championed the lady as much now as then. Her nerves had not yet got over their shaking, and she sat feeling intensely stupid and embarrassed—utterly unable to utter a couple of consecutive sentences, or twist her mind round a single idea. Bourke exerted himself to think and parry for her. She would not have minded the Squire's good-humoured *brusquerie*, or the more polished persiflage of the others, which they ceased, moreover, as soon as they suspected it gave her pain. But it was Julia de Chaillot who disconcerted

her. Julia de Chaillot, with a profusion of smiles and "dears," kept throwing little darts across, often harmless to appearances, but in reality barbed and smeared with a suspicion of poison. Julia was the more venomous that she felt all the time she had lost temper and self-control, and was behaving very foolishly. She knew any fancy for Bourke had been the merest caprice; yet she was keenly alive to the infidelity that was painfully visible to her, although utterly unsuspected by other people. She was ashamed of herself all the time for finding him worth the annoyance he caused her—she, whose fame had been in all the salons of Paris; who had flirted in her day with Cabinet Ministers, and the ambassadors of crowned heads; whose fascinations had played their part in great State schemes. She saw herself thrown over by the *protégé* it had pleased her to draw from the obscurity of his country quarters—by this penniless captain in a regiment of the line—thrown over and for whom? Ah! that was the worst of it. There Julia's strong sense came into play, and it was no consolation that it told her that her rival, with wealth and looks, youth and mind, was likely to walk away from her in a fair race. Experience and knowledge of the world—there, indeed, she had the advantage, and in a struggle of the sort, with the gain of years and the loss of freshness, they were more likely to weight her than carry her along.

Not that she had any serious idea before or now of condescending to become Mrs. Bourke. She had paid dear for caprices in her day, but this one would have been extravagance. But she meant him to come to heel at her call, until the moment when she chose to give him his contemptuous dismissal. In the meantime, it was irritating to remark his growing devotion to Alice—

irritating and provoking, but nothing more. At best, he was only preparing misery for himself. It was out of the question that a penniless adventurer should attain so great a match, especially when the golden fruit he sighed after was guarded by a dragon so watchful as Ralph Dacre. Meantime, it was provoking; and so she set herself to relieve her feelings by avenging the provocation. She saw she made them both uncomfortable, so she went on and encouraged the Squire to go on when the others would have let the subject drop.

"The whole adventure has much of charming mystery about it? Was it inspiration that warned Captain Bourke? Was it a dragon, or a hippogriff, or a winged car that picked up the modern Amadis, and brought him in the very nick of time to the aid of beauty in distress? Did some airy spirit breathe a warning in his ear as the destined champion strode the High Street at Chatham?"

"I'm sorry to dispel the mystery that has so much enchantment for Madame de Chaillot; but the explanation is prosaic as the adventure. The fact is, if there was a spirit at all, it took the form of Bagster, who, after explaining that the rest of the party had placed themselves beyond my reach, chanced to mention that Miss Dacre had gone on a sketching expedition by the heronry. I took my walk in that direction with the idea of inflicting my company on her, and there you have the whole unromantic history."

Seeing Madame de Chaillot maliciously bent, Bourke had rapidly decided it would make things pleasanter for Miss Dacre were he to tell the whole truth—pretty nearly the truth at least. For he recollected that Bagster, although he had been mistaken, as it turned out, had given him at least as plain directions for

finding the Squire. At the same time, he felt he made the explanation at considerable danger to himself. The fact of his returning from a long expedition to walk up a hot hill in search of a solitary young lady might make people think, if not talk, and, both for her sake and his own, Bourke had no desire that people should either think or speak of him in connection with Miss Dacre.

After she had made herself sufficiently disagreeable, Madame de Chaillot's tact got the upper hand at last, and stopped her from going farther. She saw she was enlisting her uncle and her brother and her sister-in-law on the side of the injured, and recollected she might be uselessly showing her hand, and purposelessly parading her own humiliation. Her game was a simple and a certain one, if only she kept quit in the meantime. A warning to Ralph Dacre would always explode any castles in the air that Philip Bourke might be fondly raising. Waiting a little was likely to do no harm. On the contrary, if Alice took to castle-building too, it might possibly be all the better. She was not at all the girl to fly in her brother's face.

CHAPTER VI.

THE CHAMPION BASKS IN THE SMILES OF BEAUTY.

JULIA DE CHAILLOT'S worldly wisdom suspended open hostilities for the rest of the evening, but none the less was she passively malicious. Each effort the conscious Bourke made at that interview with Miss Dacre he so

ardently longed for, was adroitly foiled by her well-bred omnipresence. Miss Dacre, who had lived fast since the afternoon, and whose perceptions, perhaps, had sharpened in the course of it, was sufficiently clear-sighted to read her champion's wishes, and common gratitude would have made her eager to gratify them. Besides, she was a woman and inquisitive, and there was much she longed to hear, that he alone could tell. It might have seemed simple enough that a gentleman and a young lady who were really nothing to each other, should have boldly discussed an incident in which one and the other were naturally interested. But, strange to say, Bourke, who was usually so self-possessed, had become of a sudden fully as bashful as Miss Dacre, and Madame de Chaillot paralysed them both, by merely keeping them in her eye.

But as good fortune would have it, Madame de Chaillot's quarters were at the Rectory and not at the Hall. That was the first idea that brightened up Captain Bourke's spirits as he woke the following morning after a restless night: and it was that recollection, perhaps, which had helped to restore the roses to Miss Dacre's cheeks when she came downstairs to breakfast. After breakfast Mrs. Rufford used to vanish into the nursery and schoolroom. Alice generally was left to her own devices, and these, more often than not, carried her away with a book to a seat in the shrubberies or flower-gardens. After breakfast the gentlemen usually lounged out on the gravel, and sauntered off in the direction of the stables, where they proceeded to put the cavalry of the establishment through the morning inspection. This particular morning Bourke was visibly ill at ease as the inspection proceeded, and the remarks and criticisms went their round. He would not

interest himself in the fact that the chesnut filly had gone off her feed, nor in the ugly way the mare in the loose box had grazed her near hock. Indeed, no sooner did he the Squire and Rufford and the coachman, all three with their heads close together in dangerous proximity to the fretful matron's heel, than he slipped noiselessly out at the door, treading where he could on the thick spread straw, and disappeared among the neighbouring hollies. Not unobserved by the shrewd Lord Wharfdale, who fancied he could interpret the other's actions; and who, albeit, with very different notions, felt half inclined, like his niece, to send a warning to Ralph Dacre.

"He's a pleasant young fellow, and it would be a deuce of a pity if he made a fool of himself, and still worse, if he made a fool of her."

His Lordship shook his head again as he heard the young man's purposeless saunter change to a quick decided stride, when he fancied himself well out of observation. Bourke had sharp eyes, and had held his own with Connemara gossoons as he marked the flushed snipe settle again in their native bogs. He searched the neighbouring covers, and quickly spied a flutter of white among the spreading foliage of a Portugal laurel. Then he struck boldly across, leaping the rabbit-fence, paying no respect to the carefully-raked border that should have turned him. His double-soled boots had fallen soundless on the velvet turf, and yet his intrusion on her solitude seemed no surprise to Miss Dacre. If she felt none she affected none: she looked up and smiled pleasantly; their relations seemed utterly changed, at least there could be no mistake about her making him welcome.

"I am so glad to thank you, Captain Bourke, for all

you have done for me," she exclaimed, as she frankly extended her hand, ignoring the fact of their having ever met since he handed her into the bailiff's gig. "I can never forget you saved me from such a fright as I never had before, and hope never to have again. That terrible man."

"Far be it from me to fight his battles," said Bourke lightly; infinitely relieved and exhilarated by her manner: "far be it from me to fight his battles. If you were never never so frightened, I was never half so indignant in my life as yesterday afternoon. And yet, I am bound to say, he improved on acquaintance. He had a certain rough sense of honour, that I must say for him."

"*Ou donc l'honneur va-t-il se nicher.* I don't know about his honour, Captain Bourke, but I can't say much for his civility."

"There I give him up. Oh, Miss Dacre, how savage he did make me. And now, putting the outrage to you out of the question—the ruffian—I can hardly forgive him on my own account for having dragged me into such a horrible scrape, and mixed me up in so degrading a scandal."

"Oh, Captain Bourke, surely Mr. Boycott and Lord Wharfdale fully understand the circumstances. I should be so distressed if they did not."

"And, if they did not, I should care very little—very little comparatively, that is to say. But what can you have thought of me, Miss Dacre. It is impossible you can put yourself in my place and understand——"

"Difficult, perhaps, but surely not quite impossible," she answered, smiling. "Do I not know far better than you how irritating he was. How angry I should have

been myself if I had not been so terribly afraid." Then changing her tone for a more serious one,—
"Believe me, once for all, Captain Bourke—and I have been vexing myself, you cannot think how much, that I did not tell you so boldly last night—believe me, I can never be sufficiently grateful to you: you acted bravely and nobly and considerately, and no one dare ever tell me you did not. If I only knew how to repay you."

"Had I given my life for you, Miss Dacre," exclaimed Bourke, with an Irish earnestness that brought out a touch of latent brogue, and sent the hot blood flushing up to her forehead; "had I given my life for you instead of doing nothing at all, half you have said now would have repaid me a thousand-fold. Since you fancy you owe me something, I am not generous enough to try to undeceive you. I have two favours to ask; you see I can be mercenary."

"Ask them," said Alice, looking up frankly at him with laughing eyes.

"First, never to say another word of this rather scandalous affair: that is easy."

"Not so very easy," answered Alice, "and I candidly tell you I can't answer for myself; but if you really insist upon it I will try and do my very best. Now for the second request, if you are not discouraged by the indifferent success of your first, and I do hope it may be less difficult."

"The second is, that you listen patiently to what I have to say of my unfortunate relations with my uncle. I know I have no right to trouble you with family circumstances in which you can have no possible interest, but I cannot bear to be misunderstood by ———"

"Pray stop, Captain Bourke," interrupted Alice hastily. "I can have no right to pry into your family secrets, and I hope you believe—after what you have done for me—I shall do you no injustice."

"You cannot fancy, Miss Dacre, how it lightens my heart to hear you say so, or how unhappy it has made me to feel I have been the object of what, I may venture to say it now, was a causeless prejudice. Confess," he went on, "that you do owe me the atonement of hearing me on my own defence. I could hardly explain before, because the task was so delicate. I could scarcely exculpate myself without seeming to cast blame on others. Now, forgive me, but somehow I feel as if we were become old friends of a sudden; as if I had the most entire assurance you could not misunderstand me, blunder as I might."

Miss Dacre did not seem to feel called upon to contradict Captain Bourke's somewhat cool assumption. The truth was, they had become fast friends of a sudden, and each was too much in earnest to care to stop and play at humbug. So she only rejoined,—

"Very well, then; tell me by all means if you prefer it. Indeed, on second thoughts, I almost think it may be better. Your uncle always says he likes me, and," she added, laughing, "he's not in the habit of going out of his way to say civil things. Who knows whether I may not be able to do some good, if you can only prevail on me to screw up my courage to interfere."

Philip Bourke was very ready to believe his uncle did like Miss Dacre. For once, indeed, he rather envied the older gentleman the privileges of his age and hardgrained nature in being able to tell her so. But he answered,—

"Who knows, indeed. Were it a question of a quarrel, and were there terms of peace to dictate, I could answer for one of us subscribing them. But quarrel there is none: none on my side at least, and none, I may say, on his; merely a vicious prepossession which, as I am inclined to think, argues that his long residence in Campania has not refined my uncle's taste."

Bourke spoke lightly, but he looked earnestly. The truth was, he longed to gain his case with Alice: longed to prove himself in the right, without seeming ungenerously to put his absent uncle in the wrong. Yesterday that delicate task would have appeared impossible, as indeed it would have been had he not bribed the judge's feelings beforehand. For Bourke the elder was in the wrong, as his nephew could not help showing. Was in the wrong, in so far that he had assumed interested motives in a young man of whom he knew little or nothing, and on no evidence but those of his own misanthropic suspicions, had assumed his nephew's intentions to be anything but honourable. That his nephew's conduct had never given him cause to think so, Alice, of course, had only that nephew's word. Yet she accepted his story implicitly, and it must be owned—told as Bourke told it—it might have carried conviction before a more prejudiced tribunal.

"I don't say for a moment, Miss Dacre, that when I chanced to give the matter a thought I did not fancy I should be my uncle's heir in the natural course of things. I believe I am not especially calculating or mercenary; but when you are the only nephew of a rich old gentleman, other people will take as much as that for granted, if you do not."

Bourke's story, told in very roundabout fashion—for he had to pick his way not only about his misan-

thropic uncle's reputation, but a spendthrift father's memory—came very much to this: that our old acquaintance of Sorrento, sore, from unprofitable transactions with his embarrassed brother, had seen his nephew's frank approaches through a medium of ingrained prejudice. He had used language which his jaundiced humour justified to his fancied knowledge of human nature, if not to his conscience. But all the young man's good-humoured long suffering could not brook it, especially when his pride and necessities reminded him he had heavy interests at stake. Old Bourke lived by choice in something like isolation. Young Bourke was an orphan with few near relations. The breach had widened, as is the nature of breaches, and there had been no one to help in bridging it. The uncle had never spoken to any one of the nephew. The nephew had gone his own way; his father's example had scared him into habits of tolerable prudence, and he had done his best with his modest patrimony—matrimony rather, for what little he had had all came to him from his mother's marriage settlements. He had punctiliously banished his uncle from his lips, and as much as possible from his thoughts. If he spoke of him now and in a manner spoke evil of him, it was altogether owing to the ill-considered partizanship of Alice Dacre.

It is the essence of impulse to hurry one to extremes, and in the fresh glow of her new-born gratitude perhaps Alice did some injustice to her older friend in the Bourke family. All the brighter qualities of the nephew showed so very clear to herself that she could not conceive any one else being blind to them. What could old Mr. Bourke possibly mean? Mean what he might, it was high time his eyes were opened, and she was

resolved if the couching him for his mental cataract were within the resources of science, it should be done through her instrumentality, if not through her direct agency. For although her gratitude and sudden liking for Philip Bourke were utterly without afterthought, yet even in the full flush of her resolution, it struck her there was an awkwardness in making herself the advocate of this young military man, whom her old relative must have known so very much longer than she had,—strong evidence that her wealth and the petting of society had not spoiled Alice. She did not overrate her gifts as an intercessor, nor set half such store by her seductions as either of the Bourkes.

Fortunately she knew where to find an ally, and she hastened off to Mrs. Rufford. Mrs. Rufford, with the recollection of her own not very antiquated experiences fresh in her mind, gave more meaning to Miss Dacre's flushing cheeks and earnest eyes and manner than the young lady would have done herself had she loitered to look in her glass. A whole every-day romance opened Edith's kindling fancy; her feminine sympathies developed at a glance the situation the principals never suspected. What more natural than that very nice Captain Bourke should embosom himself so unreservedly to darling Alice on so very brief an acquaintance. What more proper than that dearest Alice should instinctively champion a cause she might have so near an interest in. How nice of them both to look naturally to her to help them; how gladly she would direct and inspire Alice's influence with her experience. Porcupine to men, old Bourke smoothed down his fretful quills at the magic touch and speech of the few women he did fancy. Had he only known the league that was forming against him, he would have thrown down his

arms in advance and saved time and trouble by surrendering at discretion.

"We must stop Captain Bourke's leave at once, and order him straight back to Chatham," was Mrs. Rufford's decision, given unhesitatingly before Alice had well finished her explanation of the case. Then she smiled in spite of herself as she saw Alice's face fall in frank disappointment, and observed the pettish little movement she made, as if she regretted having bestowed her confidence rashly. But she quickly regained the control of her features, and became as grave as the delicacy of the occasion and the importance of the negotiations demanded.

"You see, Alice dear, I don't anticipate very great difficulty in arranging matters, and I do long for Captain Bourke's sake—I like him so much—to have them arranged forthwith." Alice's face brightened. "So we better have old Mr. Bourke down here at once, don't you think so? Oh, nothing will be easier; at least I hope so. Papa has carried him off more than once with no notice, to cheer his solitude, and I really don't think the presence of you or I, or Dick or the children will prevent his coming to Barham. But, of course, his nephew must be gone, and must have gone some days before. Then, our talking of him would be perfectly natural, and would never give his wary uncle the suspicion of a concerted plan. Besides, we should secure papa for our involuntary accomplice, and knowing nothing of our designs, his help would be invaluable."

"Really, Edith, I feel quite guilty at the idea of doing anything to deceive the dear old gentleman."

"Oh, well my dear, if you think it better not to interfere. For I need hardly say we undertake a great

responsibility, and have no right to meddle, if we are to leave Captain Bourke's case worse than we found it. But if you really think it better——"

"No, no," burst in Alice in uneasy haste, "I didn't quite mean that, Edith."

"Very well then, dear, don't talk nonsense. You surely don't suspect me of designing to deceive papa, or Mr. Bourke either, for that matter. I'm loyal, as the French say, if I'm anything. All I ask is, that we keep our own counsel, and let things follow their course, merely lending them the lightest of shoves in the way of hinting to papa to bring Mr. Bourke down to us. Then we shall all, sooner or later, speak the truth about his nephew; false impressions will efface themselves, and the cause of eternal justice triumph,"

And Alice listened to the counsels of this she-Achitophel, and so did Bourke. Had you told the latter the day before that he would have taken leave of Barham and Alice Dacre, his heart swelling with joy and his pulses throbbing with hope, his convictions would have given you the lie direct. Yet not for long had he felt in more exuberant spirits. It was true that fears struggled with the hopes. In the happy-go-lucky philosophy of a somewhat calm nature, he had hitherto let the world slide, and accepted his good and evil fortunes, as the awards of a destiny it was wisdom to bend to. Now he was assisting passively at a great game where others played, although his life and happiness were the stakes. It was not his uncle's inheritance he was thinking of, although he was no stupid sentimentalist, and knew the worth of money as well as most men of his standing. But already his mind was made up, that when he found the slightest tangible standing ground he was ready to throw himself at

Alice Dacre's feet, and he had half persuaded himself that with time and opportunity he might prevail on her not to spurn him. By no possibility could the penniless Captain pray the hand of the wealthy heiress, even if it were freely reached to him; pride and honour dug an impassable abyss between them. But as his uncle's heir it was altogether another thing. When it was a case of genuine love he had no idea of having the bans forbidden by the unpleasant whispers of the envious: of having the money-bags on the one side and the other nicely adjusted to an ounce, before the contract was signed and sealed.

"No, hang it, it all depends on the old gentleman behaving now as he ought to have done all along. If he remains impracticable when Alice takes him in hand, then I give him up; but that's out of the question. Hallo! to be sure there are other chances, and I never thought of them. What if he agrees to be reconciled, and stops there, and leaves the estates and money to a charity, or perhaps to Alice herself? That's what I should be very apt to do in his case, and I could not blame him. Fancy any one leaving anything to a fellow like me on the mere score of relationship when he had known a girl like her from her childhood. And if he did—there would be a catastrophe—what a go it would be; she would be none the better, for she has already far more money than she wants, and I should be infinitely the worse. Well, it's no use talking or thinking, time and a very few days will show, and meantime I am a thousand times better placed than I ever dreamed I could be the day before yesterday."

Nor was it the hopes of the inheritance made him say so; but some vivid recollection of the unguarded disclosures of Alice's speaking face.

CHAPTER VII.

*MADAME DE CHAILLOT WRITES, AND
MALICE DICTATES.*

SINCE he had quitted his solitude of Sorrento, Bourke's austerity had been softening, and he began to confess to a certain satisfaction in the society of his fellow-creatures. Yet assuredly Barham was the only house in England to which he would have let himself be summarily seduced. The special circle assembled there rather charmed than repelled him; and, while Mr. Boycott had gone on, "You'll only find so and so, and so and so," Mr. Bourke had grunted ejaculations rather of approval than disgust. Thus the conspirators had secured him: the next thing was to abuse their influence for his own benefit, and that of his nephew.

The very consciousness with which they approached this delicate subject was their danger. Edith Rufford prided herself on being, generally speaking, sufficiently woman of the world for anything in reason. Alice Dacre had hitherto swayed Mr. Bourke much as she pleased, when she liked it; but she felt, on reflection, that the secret of her power lay in the discretion with which she had been in the way of exercising it. Perhaps Mrs. Rufford trembled at the thought of the consequences that might follow the failure of her diplomacy. Certain it is that Bourke, suspicious by training and profession, and quick to read the change in the usually natural manners of his fair friend, threw up his head of a sudden, and trumpeted wildly, like a wild elephant

lured among the snares by his feebleness for a female deceiver. A moment more, and he would have turned and fled, trampling all the conveniences under his feet in his savage terror, taking his precipitate flight towards the inaccessible London jungles of his bachelor rooms and clubs.

"I really must be going back to town to-day, Mrs. Rufford," he blurted out, in answer to a wheedling invitation of that lady's to let her and Miss Dacre drive him over to her father-in-law's rectory. "Must ask Boycott to send me across to the station. Got letters this morning that oblige me to return. No help for it."

Now that morning Mrs. Rufford had assisted in person at the opening of the postbag, and was grieved—for more reasons than one—to find that her old friend had cast truth and honour behind his back, and was telling a most deliberate falsehood. She threw a meaning look at Alice, accompanied by the slightest possible shrug of her shoulders. Slight as was the movement, the wary old man caught it in the corner of his eye, and then, turning rapidly, intercepted the glance interchanged by the ladies. The game was up. Mrs. Rufford recognized it, and with laudable courage and presence of mind caught the elephant by his tusks—to carry out our metaphor—briefly told the truth, and spoke of his nephew.

"You can't think how we all like him! Like him, because he evidently likes you so much; not that he would say one word about the relationship till an accidental inquiry dragged it out of him."

"Ashamed of it, doubtless; just what I should have expected of him."

"Just what I should not have expected of you—

saying a thing which you don't for a moment believe," returned Edith, promptly; and she accompanied the words with a motion, as if she would have laid a finger on the old gentleman's lips. "In his place, I should never have claimed a relationship, which his uncle, and the head of his family, chose to disown; and neither would you. He has your own spirit, Mr. Bourke, unluckily for him, perhaps; if he had had less pride, you might have been friends long ere now."

"You don't know me yet, Mrs. Rufford," returned Bourke, rather grimly. "If Philip had come crawling after me, I should never have forgiven him, or seen him."

"Which, I am glad to hear, you mean to do now; and, in consideration of your giving him his Christian name in token of reconciliation, I am content to look over your calling me anything but Edith. Seriously, Mr. Bourke, it is taking a very great liberty in interfering at all where there is a family coolness; but when we love you so much, and have taken such a fancy to him, it seems such a pity there should be any misunderstanding."

"What does Alice say? She is marvellously quiet for her," exclaimed the old gentleman, looking round as quickly as he spoke. "Has she taken a fancy to my scapegrace nephew, too?"

At this most indiscreet home question, which she was in no way prepared to answer even to herself, Alice blushed violently, and said nothing most emphatically. She would have given a good deal to speak, but it was of no use trying; even the soft friendly eyes of Edith, when they turned on her, scorched her cheeks into flames. Bourke was a gentleman, and did not abuse the privilege of his age to make his young favourite

uncomfortable. He was clear-sighted, notwithstanding his years, and had not altogether forgotten his youth; and, perhaps, her silence and her blushes were more eloquent with him than any words would have been. Her opinion of his nephew may have gone some way as a certificate to character, and possibly he may have been floated towards a recociliation in sunny dreams of match-making, notwithstanding he was of the harder sex. At any rate, he changed the theme for the time adroitly, not abruptly; but he said nothing more of his flight to town, and he reverted to his nephew, an hour later, when he found himself in the garden with Edith, out of earshot.

"Do you expect him soon," he said; and Edith understood quite well to whom the "he" referred. "Boycott's sure to have asked him to come back; he is always so hospitable."

"I really don't know, Mr. Bourke. I believe papa may have mentioned that you were expected; and I am quite sure Captain Bourke would do nothing he thought disagreeable to you."

Ah, Edith, Edith! white fib-telling must be contagious, for you must have known "papa" had never an opportunity of mentioning anything of the sort.

"Why, Boycott can't believe that I should object to meeting any guest he chose to ask," exclaimed Bourke. "My dear Edith, I'd leave his house this very afternoon if I thought so."

"I only know papa always likes to see his guests comfortable—all of them. But I know, too, he would like to have Captain Bourke over—and Captain Bourke, I don't doubt, would be glad to be here—poor fellow, he must find it terribly dull at Chatham."

"And does not find it at all dull at Barham—very

far from it; ah, Edith!" queried the old gentleman, looking meaningly towards Alice, who, sharply following their talk with her fancy, was seated at the end of the terrace, hypocritically deep in a book.

Edith blushed slightly for her absent friend, as in duty bound, and gave a smile by way of answer. It ratified an understanding between her and her old companion, and from that moment forward the two were accomplices, and lucky Captain Bourke's bread and butter, to all appearance, was cut for life.

Edith's *protégé* came to Barham on pressing invitation, to find she had laid the foundation of fortune for him. If he wooed Alice—and now he hardly attempted to disguise from himself, nor her, nor any one else, that he loved her—he felt towards Edith as to a beneficent Madonna, and was always offering her the incense of his gratitude with his looks, if not with his lips. There may be a plurality of patron saints, but he did not dare to make quite the same fervent demonstrations towards Miss Dacre, who showed herself, notwithstanding, by no means jealous. He delighted to pretend to be sceptical, that he might force Mrs. Rufford into explanations and reiterations. She laboured to impress on him how much he owed that to Alice: and, we regret to add, that in her earnestness Mrs. Rufford betrayed her friend, and more than hinted at the eloquent confusion with which she received old Mr. Bourke's ill-advised speech. Really, Captain Bourke began to see his way pretty plain before him to the goal of his wishes. If, as yet, he had not told his love, it was partly because he loved to dally in the pleasures of a love-chase that could only have a happy termination—partly, perhaps, from the nervous apprehension that makes a man hesitate before risking

a tremendous stake, so long as he has not squared the remotest chance that may possibly tell against him.

He felt the inequality between their fortunes was pretty well levelled. She might be the richer still, but she would not bestow her hand on a beggar. If his uncle had never told him that he was his heir in so many words, the old gentleman went out of his way to take it always for granted. Bourke, the elder, was too much of the world he had lived so much out of, to take his nephew's love affairs in hand, or push the young man over to his bride, after the fashion of blustering uncles on our earlier stage. But Alice and his Tipperary estates were the favourite topics on which he entertained him, and Philip was very willing to talk of one or the other.

"Carrigaholt will be empty in spring. The man who has had it for the last half-dozen years died at Nice last winter, and his widow wants to get rid of the place. You ought to pass some months at least, in the west every season. Absenteeism plays the very mischief with a tenantry. Yes, you may smile. I know I never practised as I preach; but it's one thing a bachelor going and burying himself in the back settlements by himself, quite another——"

Bourke checked himself. As we said, he made a point of never touching on his nephew's marriage to Alice in so many words; yet, far from shying at the obvious allusion, his nephew looked as gratified as the terrier whose ear he happened to be scratching at the moment. The sole objection he urged to the plan was not grounded on his celibacy.

"One might amuse oneself very well over there, and do some good too, I daresay." He did not care to dwell on the latter consideration, out of regard for his uncle

who for forty long years had never gone near the family place. "One might do some good I dare say, but unfortunately it is out of the question in my case. I couldn't count on leave, even if my regiment were not under orders for India."

"I tell you what, Philipp, I really don't see any object in your delaying selling out. You made a lucky leap in your promotion at first, but now you seem stuck hard and fast at the bottom of the captains: I was looking at the Army List yesterday. No more fighting to be done by us in Europe, take my word for it and the army in peace time is close arrest on short commons: besides it's out of the question for a lady to get up on a baggage waggon. I mean, don't you trouble your head about the ways and means, my good fellow. There's no sort of hurry, but when we do go back to town, we'll have something settled at once, in one way or other."

Conversations of the sort, in seeming to assure his position, gradually placed Philip Bourke entirely at his ease. He knew his uncle a man to be trusted. It seemed as if a benevolent fairy had all at once dipped him in a Pactolus, and then turned him out to dry, in the exhilarating air of a rosy dreamland. But the other day, and he had to go into committee of ways and means over all manner of trifles—his gloves, his cigars, even his coats, if he hoped to make the two ends meet at the end of the year. He saw himself, as his uncle said, stuck hard and fast in a joyless profession that he had already worn the shine off; bored to death with mess-table talk, and staring blankly into a dreary future; conjuring up at the end of the dull vista an ennui-worn veteran, stripping off a thread-bare coat to step down into a nameless grave. No hope of active service; no room for activity, mental or physical; remote

chance of promotion. If he dreamed of love, it was of love pining in four bare walls overlaid with pipeclay; of a wife mounted on a load of barrack furniture, and creaking along in the rear of the regiment. Fancy proffering such a fate to some delicate-bred girl like Alice Dacre, for to his pride and honour, Alice's fortune placed Alice herself hopelessly beyond his reach.

But now; now, he could look her in the candid eyes as he trenched luxuriously on the borders of the ground, his pride had warned him off only the other day. Free to him to win and wear if he could. And almost won she was, although he dallied over asking her to own it. He scarcely yet knew himself as he had come to be. His independence forbade him utterly to forget in a moment the cold-shouldering of years: prudence whispered not to take rashly for granted more than his uncle had assured him of in so many words. He told himself that an accident had surprised Alice's gratitude, and he shrunk from tricking her into an avowal she might regret and repent on calmer reflection. And perhaps chivalrously, and perhaps foolishly, he lived on from hour to hour in his paradise, forging and reforging the love fetters he might have rivetted with a word.

Two pairs of watchful feminine eyes marked his growing passion with very different feelings. Rival powers of good and evil were interesting themselves in his fate, and the malicious principle of evil, as was natural, was the more active.

Mrs. Rufford looked on placidly at an affair that seemed to "move by itself," scarcely needing the assistance her benevolent tact was always ready to lend it. She restrained herself to the extent of letting nothing

of the arch pierce through her manner, when she spoke of Bourke to Alice; although to her observant eyes, the flush of the cheek, the droop of the eyebrow, with which that young lady received these allusions, never went unperceived. She made her husband the sole confidant of her hopes, or rather her certainties, and she dwelled on them so much and recurred to them so often that she must have bored a less good-natured man out of all patience. To her father she said nothing. She had few secrets from him, especially at Barham, but she feared his blunt satisfaction might be so outspoken as to scare Alice back, just when she was fluttering down into Bourke's arms. Lord Wharfdale was gone. It is true his niece, Madame de Chaillot, came often over from the rectory: it is true, they were still dear Julia and dearest Edith to each other: it is certain Mrs. Rufford fancied nothing of love passages, past or present, between her friend Philip and the sparkling widow. Yet Madame de Chaillot was the very last person in the world, before whom Mrs. Rufford would have been honestly expansive.

Madame de Chaillot watched and smiled: smiled occasionally in spite of her practised self-command, with the air of a woman who has been tricked into tasting a crab for a pippin, and who chooses to pretend she rather likes it. Bourke gained in value every day he wandered farther away from her, and distance lent fresh enchantment to the view. Now that she knew him to be wealthy in prospect, he became to her a different man, and she regarded him with very different eyes. Perhaps he brightened to the consciousness of the happiness his new position promised him. She thought it might have been worth her while to think

of him seriously, just as she confessed that it was too late. For do what they would, her vanity and self-respect could not blind her common sense. So she gave him up. What had never been liking turned almost to dislike, as she averted her head from the sour grapes, casting at them, all the time, certain wistful glances. As for Alice, she hated her; so she told herself fifty times a day, and there is no reason to doubt her speaking the truth. At least as well as the more kindly ones of Edith Rufford, her sharp eyes fathomed the depths of that young lady's feelings, and at least fifty times a day she vowed she would find means to forbid the banns that every one else seemed to contemplate with such unfeigned satisfaction.

Heaven knows how long she might have gone on searching after some subtle expedient that was malevolently slow of suggesting itself. As in the assurance of his coming happiness, Philip did not over-hurry himself, perhaps she thought there was nothing so very pressing. Perhaps had something or somebody chanced to come in the way to distract her ideas, her languid resentment might have died away, and she might have broken the vicious vows that were dictated by no more dignified passion than spite.

But when powder is left lying carelessly about, we never know what chance spark may fire it. One evening when the gentleman entered the drawing-room after dinner, as Philip lingered for a moment by the entrance, the Squire passed him and threw himself into the vacant corner of a sofa, where Alice was sitting by Mrs. Rufford's side. Mrs. Rufford remarked on Bourke's face the passing look of disappointment she expected to see there; and would have given him her place as soon as she could have done it unobtrusively.

But her father engaged her in conversation across Alice, and needs was to remain. Madame de Chaillot had caught the look, too, bit her lip, and smiling winningly, called Bourke's attention to some photographs she was turning over. Bourke had often reproached himself for his almost uncivil neglect of his earliest acquaintance in the family; an acquaintance to whom he owed a fast growing debt of gratitude. Now was the time cheaply to pay off some of the arrears. No such heavy task either, although having blinded his eyes by fixing them on the star he worshipped with adoration so constant, Bourke forgot that Madame de Chaillot was a very fascinating woman. This time, as it chanced, the subject she hit upon had a common interest for them.

"You know the Pyrenees, Captain Bourke; tell me what you think of this photograph of the Lac de Gaube?"

"The Lac de Gaube, oh yes, I know it well. Admirably sharp and clear, and taken from the most artistic points of view as all Lyte's are. Only—it may be the jealousy of a dabbler in colours,—but when one has made the most of the rare effects you meet with in these lakeless mountains: when day after day you have delighted yourself with the snow-peaks of the Vignemale, mirrored back from the calm green of the lake, then, when you see them in photograph and without the floods of changing light, your favourite outlines come to you like the melancholy ghosts of a merry past. As well ask you to admire a beauty of the court of the Pharaohs in her mummy-wrappings."

Madame de Chaillot objected: protested against the truth and force of the metaphor. They got animated. From one view in the mountains they passed to another;

lost themselves to sit together in some rock-locked meadow, where the hum of the bees that hovered over the beds of gentian chimed with the drowsy murmur of the perpetual streams: to study some bit of sunny savagery, where the snow-torrent, arched over by the deep blue of the firmament, swept round the roots of the silver firs it had already mined to their fall.

Bourke had made love to those scenes with an artist's heart, and in over-hurried visits to them his love had had no time to pall with enjoyment. Julia de Chaillot had retreated thither in successive summers when the fashion of the season whisked the gay world of Paris into nooks and corners of France. To both they brought back happy memories; the lady quite forgot she was laying herself out to annoy Alice, and talked eagerly and unaffectedly: Bourke grew equally interested in the conversation, and showed he did.

Madame de Chaillot, seated on a low *prie-dieu*, was looking up earnestly in his eyes, breathing low and with suppressed animation, nothing more significant than—

"No, I shall never forget that moment when the clouds lifted from the Pic de Nethon, &c., &c."

But looking, now she had for once forgotten herself, very handsome and syren-like, when Mrs. Rufford interrupted her.

Was it jealousy for Alice or for herself, or one of those outbreaks of mortal frailty which, luckily for the rest of us, bring the best of women within reach of the liking of common mortals? Certain it is that her apparently innocent remark had all the effect she could possibly have intended, and ultimately a good deal more than she ever counted on. Madame de Chaillot chanced to be speaking so low that, without incivility, Mrs.

Rufford might have taken it for granted she was not speaking at all.

"We are longing to hear, Captain Bourke, whether you have anything to tell us of, but a day mis-spent in our absence at Humbledon. To our surprise, both your uncle and my father deny all knowledge of your proceedings. Miss Dacre will maintain that you must have been getting her that sketch of the cottage by the churchyard at Illington. I don't believe, for my own part, you have been half so profitably employed."

In the present state of his feelings Miss Dacre's name was a spell to conjure Captain Bourke out of the better part of his manners. Further, he had not sketched the cottage at Illington. She had expressed a wish he should do so. He felt he was put on his defence, and he longed to plead to the charge and to exculpate himself. Suddenly, forgetful of Madame de Chaillot and her interrupted sentence, he replied to Mrs. Rufford, and Miss Dacre joining in the conversation, he was drawn into animated argument. He rose insensibly to his feet, gradually was charmed up to the sofa, on Mr. Boycott vacating his corner, quietly dropped into it, and talking to Alice, absolutely ignored Madame de Chaillot, the Pyrenees, and everything else.

He did not remark the look the latter lady shot at him out of her expressive eyes, nor the black scowl with which she bent over the photograph she crumpled in her hand—a blacker never gathered in an autumn thunder-storm round that frowning triple crest of the Vignemale she was gazing on. His uncle saw it all, shrugged his shoulders slightly, and chuckled to himself. He did not like Madame de Chaillot, and he delighted in her obvious discomfiture. He had begun to pride himself on his nephew, and his pride was

flattered by this fresh proof of his fascination. But he said to himself, "That woman can't help showing her teeth, and will certainly use them if ever she has a chance," and his chuckle changed to a snarl as he decided to place himself in observation for the future, watching over the happiness of the lovers like a rugged old watch-dog.

Madame de Chaillot's show of teeth did not pass away in snarling. That evening at the Rectory, when she had dismissed her maid, and found, herself left in *peignoir* and slippers in her solitude, she walked her room in feverish thought, staring from time to time through the open window on the quiet night for inspiration. Not very successfully. She was too recently piqued to think coolly, and the evil spirits who may have rallied to her help were not fertile in suggestions. She fell back upon a mode of proceeding that had frequently presented itself to her thoughts before, and sat down to write to Ralph Dacre. She had taken the precaution to pave the way by a letter that trespassed on their old friendship for advice in some French matters of business. No one could be so fit to counsel her on them as he. She knew he had so many business irons in the same Parisian furnace as herself.

Yet she tore up sheet after sheet before she decided on the following. Even when that was written she was less satisfied than ever, but she felt that her brain was too tired to mend the matter, and she knew she could never slumber peacefully till the thing was done. The pregnant communication had one merit for a lady's letter—it was not very prolix.

"DEAR MR. DACRE, —" *Barham Rectory, July 7, 1861.*

"I NEED hardly say I did not ask your advice to reject it. I have sold all Mexican bonds—against the

earnest protestations of M. Gaboche, by the way; and now I think I shall put all the proceeds into Credit Mobiliers. I am a poor woman of business, or I should not have ventured to trouble you; but I know my dear husband had always a high opinion of them. In any case, he was closely *lié* with MM. Tereire, and I doubt not, for old friendship's sake, they will give me a hint when I meet them.

"Why do you not come down to Barham? We have such a charming party, I say we, for really, although I am nominally at the Rectory, I spend more than half my time at the Hall. Old Mr. Bourke and a nephew of his are the only strangers there. I delight in the old gentleman, and his nephew is perfectly charming. Accomplished, agreeable, rather handsome, and in strength, courage, and chivalry a champion of romance. Your sister has, of course, told you all about the picturesque adventure when he came so gallantly to her rescue. Has she sent you the sketch of the famous spot, that is likely to live in Barham legend? They have been busy over it lately, and the joint production ought to be something admirable. I am sure, at least, they have devoted ample time to it; but as it is a long way from the house; and the park is steep and the sun hot, the rest of us leave them much to their own devices, and to tell the truth they don't seem to mind it at all.

"Really, dear Mr. Dacre, it is hardly fair to make a business note an excuse for inflicting a chapter of domestic history on you. My excuse is that your sister is the prominent figure in it, and I know what an excellent brother you are, and how much you are interested in her and all her concerns.

"Adieu. Will it be abusing your good-nature to

ask you to send me a single line about the Credit Mobilier shares?

"Very sincerely yours,
"JULIA DE CHAILLOT."

CHAPTER VIII.

"*MAN PROPOSES.*"

MADAME DE CHAILLOT fully counted on an answer to her letter in the shape of Dacre in his proper person; but she was mistaken. True, next to himself, sometimes even before himself, Ralph's concern centred in his sister. In ordinary circumstances his startled solicitude as guardian and brother would have sent him down express to look after her. But these were no ordinary circumstances. Our friend Ralph, in his seemingly prosperous walk through life, had tripped all of a sudden, and stumbled upon perilous and evil times. His immediate stumbling-block was the flourishing bank whose chair he filled; but misfortunes seldom come singly for Banks of the class. Eastern business is like tropical vegetation—it shoots up of a night, to be blasted and cut down of a morning. The Metropolitan and Oriental, pluming itself on exceptional enterprise, did a tremendously speculative trade. It found no lack of clients among that energetic native caste, who, living on a little rice, turn rupees by lacs for the mere lust of excitement and the sheer pleasure of getting. The worst of it is that catastrophe in that class is contagious, and, as in a game of ninepins, when one goes down he is apt to make wild work among his fellows. Then the local

managers of a rising Oriental bank are often lunatics when they are not scoundrels, and when they don't rob their principals with a method, make ducks and drakes of their funds in a sheer spirit of rivalry and devilry. Famine was stalking abroad, too, in the north-west provinces; *Nil Darpan* was firing the feverish native mind; sinister rumours had come home, and there was an uneasy downward movement in the shares. Unpleasant letters were submitted by the manager to the chairman; out of doors the confidence in the bank seemed shaking. Ralph had been uneasy for some time. Prominent among the builders of the establishment, he knew as much of the foundation and superstructure as most men. He spoke to Asgill on the subject one day. Involuntarily he had to keep Asgill in the secrets of his investments.

"Even for chairman I am too deep in the Metropolitan and Oriental. I think I shall get rid of the better part of my shares. A nuisance, for I should have sold well a couple of months back. Still, I don't like the look of things. It appears to me very much as if it was blowing up for a gale."

"Sell! my dear Dacre," exclaimed Asgill, with well-feigned astonishment. "You sell; you can't possibly mean it! Why, what the deuce do you expect is to come to the bank, if it once gets wind that the chairman is selling? I don't believe there is the slightest danger now: nothing worse than a temporary droop. But if you do take to the line you threaten, it needs no prophet to prophesy squalls and wreck. Nonsense, man, think better of it!"

"It never need get wind that I am selling; and I am heavily in."

"You know as well as I do, Dacre, that there are

secrets there is no keeping. Come, come, you can never mean deliberately to ruin your friends!"

"Ruin my friends?"

"Ruin your friends. You are no innocent, Dacre; quite the reverse. Pray pay our friendship and my common sense the compliment of not trying to humbug me." Asgill was clearly perturbed, even to the length of getting angry.

Dacre continued to stare at him in affected astonishment.

"Come, come; you know as well as I do, that if you sell, the bank goes to the bears and the dogs. If the bank goes, I go, and that is plain speaking. I can no more meet my engagements to it than I could pay off the terminable annuities. Now, I don't mean to go yet awhile, not if I can help it, at least."

Dacre's eyes flashed, and he drew himself up.

"You pretend to dictate to me?"

"I pretend to dictate to no man! If you choose to ruin me, ruin me. Only I fancy you know me well enough to believe I'm not the man to put up with an injury, when I can retaliate."

"And if I give you the only answer I can give, and tell you to do your worst!"

"Why, I should go and do it; and I should not have much trouble either. I should only talk, and leave others to act."

"Talk!"

"Aye. Of that ugly stock exchange scandal, for instance, that was breathed about in the days when you were Lord Bullington's right-hand man, at the Foreign Office. Of all I have heard since of the knowing ones' surmise about the sources you drew the money from that you have been handling so freely the last few years.

The world is so evil-minded, and pretends to be so well informed. They do say that you might as well look for money among the encumbrances of Allonby, as for diamonds among the Cheviots; and that if you had estates in the clouds, they would bring you in as much of an income as Heppenstall. Yet you lead the train of a prince. I know within the last few weeks you have lost heavily by speculation; and you administer the great fortune of your sister with an untainted reputation. You should have an opportunity to silence these scandals; and if you cut the bank, I shall give it you. I swear it. I owe it to our friendship. I have some facts I have hitherto locked in my bosom; some writings even, I am pretty sure, that may throw light upon it."

Asgill looked even more than he said. Ralph sat glooming in silence. His cheeks, except for the burning spot on either cheek-bone, were as pale as the handkerchief whose corner he gnawed in his teeth. His eyes had an ugly light in them that made Asgill uneasy in his turn. He had, perhaps, more cause for uneasiness than he suspected. The dash of the wild beast in Ralph's nature had the upper hand for the moment, and he knew himself capable of violence that would snap the tight-drawn situation with a vengeance. The chain this man was dragging him by galled him to the very quick: the dilemma tendered him became insupportable. Were the charges true or false the inquiry would be nearly equally blighting to his reputation. At least, he would be convicted of imposing on the world with his fictitious wealth; of accepting a charge, that should be sacred, under the strongest temptations to betray it. What would be the verdict of a jury of men of honour on his conduct? what

the thoughts of Alice? what Edith Rufford's opinion of the cousin she had come so near to loving? He shuddered. He dared not break with Asgill; yet pride whispered imperiously, and would be obeyed. For the moment it thrust even interest back to the second place, as it told him he could not possibly yield to threats.

The wary Asgill followed eagerly all the changes of his shifting expression, and read plainly as a book the language of real passion that coursed across his troubled features. He saw his enemy or friend was beaten, but desperate, and he hastened to throw him a plank his vanity might retreat by. He changed his whole tone and manner with a mighty effort. He was the genial Asgill, whose acquaintance Ralph had formed that fatal day at Baden.

"God bless you, Dacre, my dear boy, I've put you out, and I'm grieved already at it! I could eat my words a thousand times over to bring back a smile to your face—eat them the easier that a full half of them were breath, and nothing more. It's rarely I lose my temper; but when I do, my head goes as well. But when you spoke so calmly of ruining me, you must confess I had some excuse. Come, forget and forgive. Say, you spoke hastily when you talked of selling these shares for a caprice, and there is no apology or reparation I will not make you."

Ralph's face grew blacker than before. Then having paid tribute to his convulsed nature, he calmed his looks and manner in turn with a suddenness that threw Asgill's transformation into the shade. In brief, the pair parted, with smiles on their lips like winter sunbeams on the ice, and a pressure of the hand that one at least would have liked to have given to the other's windpipe. Ralph Dacre, just when he needed his utmost liberty

of spirit and will to steer him through his thick and threatening troubles, found the one a prey to ravening apprehensions and remorse; the other bound to the bidding of a man, who regulated his orders by his own selfish ends. And it was the man for whose friendship he had sacrificed Edith Boycott's love, and the rich inheritance of Barham.

He would have rushed off to see his sister, perhaps as much as anything else to make the most of her regard and affection, while he was sure of them, but he shrunk from it. In his frame of mind, with the fresh fret of his regrets upon him, she—and Edith Rufford as well—would have come to him like an embodied remorse. Mdme. de Chaillot's letter arrived to pour vitriol on his wounded spirit. Misfortunes never do come singly. This Bourke seemed another Nemesis sent to hunt him down in company with the execrated Asgill. He had never owned to himself that he would be jealous of the lover of the sister he loved so well, if she could find a man to make her happy. Yet the quiet dullness of Barham, whose manless neighbourhood he knew so well, had had no small share in easing his mind when he urged her to go visiting there. And now, there she was, cast into the country in the long objectless summer days, with a man whose fascinations his fancy exaggerated, and who had recommended himself to the romance in her nature by something seemingly like an adventure. Odd enough, and quite sufficient to awaken his suspicion, that the candid Alice had just hinted at the adventure, and given but a passing allusion to the champion. A girlish fancy it would be a charity to crush. If there was anything really in it—if flirtation should really lead to marriage, and marriage to reckoning her money, how the calculation

might complicate his already embarrassed affairs. Her money, indeed, was so mixed up with his, that extrication was difficult, and promiscuous sales at the moment likely to prove almost ruinous. Backing the Northern States in the war, he had bought freely into American Securities, and battles like those of Carthage and Bull's Run sent American Securities tumbling. Yet if he had only stood now, as he stood some short weeks before on his sister's birthday!

Then this Bourke, this nephew, who was he? How came it he had never heard that the old man had so near a relative? He knew the old gentleman liked him less than Alice, but then he seemed to care for the two far more than any one else; and he had been the intimate friend of their father. Ralph had begun to reckon on the Tipperary estates and their accumulating rents, as likely to come into his family. Now this young man had started up; was living under the same roof with his rich uncle, evidently on the best of terms with him. He saw the whole thing. “Old Bourke will help his nephew to Alice, on whom he will lay his paternal commands to marry: he will dower the happy couple with his own property in reversion, and all will be said.” And his own solitary hearth, which the sister he had grown so dependent on, should be torn from.

“Not that it can greatly signify when the roof-tree shall have fallen in on me,” he added, bitterly.

And to do him justice, the idea of being robbed of the foremost place in his sister's affection, had no small share in the score of hatred he was running up to “this fortune-hunter” Bourke. Yes, he would save Alice, in spite of herself, always supposing she was really in danger. He would see with his eyes, and hear with

ears: possibly still be in time. He would go down to Barham the first thing—the very next day.

When man proposes, he often proposes in vain. Next day Ralph had other fish to fry, and over a very hot fire.

On his way to the station he ran his eyes over the telegrams in the morning papers. One from Egypt: “The Peninsular and Oriental Company’s steamer, *Jumna*, brings news from Bombay. The famine grows daily more terrible in Bundelcund. The cholera has broken out in cantonments, at Beybhoom, and the 27th Irregular Cavalry have lost their adjutant, Lieutenant Maitland, and forty-seven Sowars. The bills of the Metropolitan and Oriental Bank were protested at Bombay, on the 29th ult.”

Good heavens! He struck his umbrella through the roof of the Hansom, and shouted a change in his orders. “The Metropolitan and Oriental, Nicholas Lane, Lombard Street!”

The doors had been opened but half-an-hour: it was before the time when the general public had arrived from the suburbs to commence their dealings. But already there was an ominous run on the counters, although for comparatively trifling sums. Already he met men walking off with pockets bulging with sovereigns,—pocketbooks stuffed with Bank of England notes. Cheerful faces there were, as of men who had snatched from the fire something they had come near the losing. He overheard such phrases as—

“Shaky for some time past: always thought it must go: doing a diabolically risky business.”

“No doubt of it! A bank that draws on itself in India; lucky my happening to hear of it first thing as I came to town; another hour and it might have been too late.”

"You're right there my worthy friend," exclaimed the chairman, *sotto voce*, "thanks for the hint." He passed on, through the spacious hall, thick set with desks, and swarming with idle clerks; who began scribbling vigorously on his apparition in the inner passage whence opened the sancta of the chairman and manager. The manager had not yet arrived: he never was very punctual, it appeared. The deputy manager was there and all abroad!

"What have we in the 'house?" queried the chairman. He shook his head at the answer.

"And to our credit at the Bank of England?" To that second answer he shuddered visibly.

"Give the cashiers a hint, Mr. Mason, to pay quietly and not hurry themselves. If Mr. Smouch, the manager, comes, tell him to do nothing till I come back. I am going to Threadneedle Street. A hansom there, quick."

The promise of a quadruple fee to the driver, and Ralph galloped the hundred yards. With some parleying he forced his way to the Bank parlour, to see no one after all in very high authority. Words were worth gold; they were worth credit and salvation to him, and the Bank people would give him no definite answer. But they shook their heads at the securities he talked of tendering, and gave him no hope. The game was up, and assets were running to waste that might come in useful in liquidations. He hastened back nearly as fast as he had come, although with far heavier heart. The shutters went up in the windows of the Metropolitan and Oriental, and no small number of intensely disgusted clients were left raging and swearing on the narrow pavements outside.

The meetings of the Board came on in swift course,

to take the affairs of the insolvent concern into consideration. Easy-going directors, who had figured as cyphers and decoy-ducks, began to find out how their names had been played with. At the first meeting a dead set was made by these indignants at Mr. Smouch, the manager, who certainly seemed to have been exceedingly reckless in affording accommodation. The chairman, who felt acutely the collapse of the concern, did not hesitate to condemn the dealings of Mr. Smouch. Mr. Smouch, like a prudent man, who is the victim of appearances, said very little, and gave the smooth answer that should turn wrath aside. The meeting over he insisted on button-holing Mr. Dacre, and they had an animated conversation in hissing whispers,—“Gaboche—Asgill—that 12,000*l*.” It was clear the gentlemen were referring in special to a conversation our readers may remember. At the next meeting the chairman candidly confessed he had been somewhat hasty in his judgment, and rather took the part of Mr. Smouch.

Mr. Bumpus, one of the directors, who had figured for show, a good man of business—as men of business go, although engrossed with affairs of his own firm,—lost his temper. He made a direct onslaught on the chairman.

“It is true, we have traded rashly in the East, but, at least, we have made large profits there to set against our losses. If we gambled we gambled with our eyes open. Here, at home, my attention has been called to heavy advances made on securities which I am now informed were illusory. I assented to them, I am ashamed to confess, but I assented on the moral guarantee of leading members of the board. Here is Mr. Asgill for 37,000*l*. M. Gaboche, of Paris, 29,000*l*.

We have their names on our paper, it is true, but the shares deposited as collateral security are rubbish.” He looked hard at Ralph Dacre as he spoke.

Mr. Dacre cast a quiet glance at Mr. Smouch. Mr. Smouch’s face was bent on the table before him, and he affected to be busy writing. Mr. Dacre’s pride was stung, and a hasty resolution committed him to an irretrievable folly. Going out of his way to protect his impeached reputation, he compromised that and his future position as well.

“You are right, Mr. Bumpus. Messrs. Asgill and Gaboche are friends of mine, introduced by me. I answer for their solvency as my own.”

“Very good,” replied Mr. Bumpus quietly. “Then I have been misinformed and apologize most humbly. The chairman, whose credit is beyond suspicion, guarantees the debts of these gentleman, and there is nothing more to be said.”

Ralph Dacre walked out of the board-room with a heavy extra load on his heart; a load, the weight of which, he would only slowly realize. It was clear he must see Asgill at once—perhaps Gaboche—and know what he had to look to. With that and the other personal matters connected with the broken bank on his hands, it was quite out of the question he should be able to leave town now.

Much as he loved his sister, and because he loved his sister, profoundly as her love affairs concerned him, they must keep for the present. He would write her, and in common courtesy he would answer Madame de Chaillot’s letter. And, meantime, he must cast about for an issue from the labyrinth in which he seemed so desperately involved.

CHAPTER IX.

IN THE HANDS OF THE TORMENTORS.

THE Metropolitan and Oriental Board had lost no time in issuing circulars of explanation to their shareholders, their clients, and the general public. They deplored the unfortunate occurrence which had compelled them to close their doors; deplored it the more that it had arisen from a most unfortunate misunderstanding. They had the satisfaction of announcing, however, that the suspension of business would be only temporary, and that arrangements then in progress, must enable them speedily to resume operations, &c. &c. As might be supposed, the bank did not resume operations, and yet the smash proved by no means a bad one. The capital had been intact, and a considerable reserve fund had been accumulated. The Indian losses had been heavy, it was true, but there was ample margin left after providing for them. And the doubtful debts made at home had turned out by no means so bad as they had appeared at first sight. Asgill, Gaboche and Company were coming to the front like men, merely asking a little time. Even the very shady connection which Mr. Smouch, the manager, had accommodated proved themselves more responsible than had been surmised at first blush.

"Really, Bumpus," remarked his fellow-director, General Bangles, a nice old gentleman, who had toddled out and in of the premises, and freely partaken of Nicholas Lane lunches in happier days. "Really, Bumpus, you were rather hasty with poor Smouch that

first day. And I don't wonder at Dacre taking you up as he did, and pledging himself for Mr. Asgill and that Frenchman. You see they're right enough after all; it looks as if he would not have to pay a penny for them, and doubtless he knew it."

"We're all right, General Bangles, as far as they are concerned, at least I begin to think we are, and after all that is the great thing. Who pays the money, or where he finds it, I don't pretend to say, and of course it's not my business to inquire."

Bumpus had spoken to himself more than to Bangles, and seeing the General staring at him open-mouthed and open-eyed, he thought he might have gone too far, and proceeded to turn it off, which was easily done. Bangles was a model director, and lent himself as lithely as any man living to twisting round the finger.

Although Ralph Dacre alone knew the precise source whence the money came, more than one of his "friends" were in the secret of his being the channel it flowed through. Certainly that rash speech of his at the Metropolitan Board had laid him under no legal obligation, and even the moral one, he might have held lightly too, had he only had to deal with his fellow-directors. No man is fairly bound by all he blurts out in moments of excitement; the safest man of business may be misled as to the personal credit of acquaintances. He might have left the Board to fight it out with their debtors; to sell the illusory securities they held for anything they might fetch; to hustle Messrs. Asgill and Gaboche into the insolvent court for all they were unwilling or unable to pay. Unluckily Gaboche and Asgill were men of resource, and had no idea of being ruined if they could

possibly help it. Still more unfortunately for Dacre, these worthies pressed upon him a solidarity of interests he strove in vain to repudiate, and insisted upon finding their resources in him. Gaboche had been hurried over from Paris by the exigencies of the crisis, and he and Asgill were hunting Ralph in couples, with the dogged determination of hunting him down. For the day or two after that meeting of the Board we referred to, their eagerness to see him grew steadily more intense. During the day he avoided his house, and even his club, and each night, when he called at the one, as he slunk home to the other, the porter presented him a sheaf of calling cards. The packs of cards were seasoned with piquant notes, which steadily ran up the gamut from friendship through politeness to implied menace. He answered them punctiliously, for he dreaded the consequences of ignoring them. He knew further that the personal interview could not be long deferred; if he insisted on delaying it, it was from something more rational than nervous weakness. He was searching for the thread that might lead him out of the maze, at some cheaper ransom than he seemed likely to have to pay.

In vain. Perhaps he was looking for the impossible; perhaps he had dulled his brains by constant cudgelling. There are certain friendships that only end with death, and it always came back to him, that there was no possibility of severing the fond ties that knitted him to Asgill. When he received the following note, his first movement was one very like fury. Could a word have done it, and could he have buried with him the secret the unwelcome communication referred to, he might have been capable of consigning his correspondent to the silence of the tomb.

"DEAR DACRE, "I KNOW you must be much occupied, and, believe me, both Gaboche and I can easily sympathize with you in your distractions. Still old friendship has its claims, and *strong* ones, and, moreover, we must meet as matter of business. Gaboche—you know his nature—is hurt and excited; he even talks of taking the public into our secret. Upon my word, should he hear nothing to-night, I greatly fear he may place himself in communication with the Board of your Bank before the meeting to-morrow. So come, my dear fellow, and dine quietly with us to-night at eight. *You really had better.*

"Ever yours, "A. A."

But he mastered his first impulse, and having read the note a second time, and scowled savagely over the words underlined, he sat himself down to scrawl a hasty acceptance. For the life of him, he could not compass his pen to even the "dear" Asgill of form. He merely scribbled, "I shall be with you at dinner," affixed his initials, and relapsed into meditations equally profound and purposeless.

At the hour of dinner he painfully cleared his brow, and when he appeared at Asgill's, except that he had aged, aged even in the last few days, he might have been the Dacre of the memorable banquet of twelve years before at Philippe's. Rather aged and something graver, for the chairman of a bank that has just closed its doors has serious matters for reflection. But he was at his ease and more than civil, indeed Asgill himself was hardly more pleasant in manner.

"Ah, Dacre, very glad to see you—at last."

"How are you, Asgill! It was by the happiest chance I got your note when I did. A few minutes later, and I should have been out of the way for the day. And you, Gaboche, how goes it? Not too badly, I hope."

Gaboche merely grunted something that might have borne any meaning; he did not trust himself to speak. But his hair bristled rather more than usual, his little bloodshot eyes twinkled viciously, and the crumpled frill of his slovenly shirt-front swelled ominously. A vulgar Frenchman, who has lost his temper, is an unpleasant brute to look at or to listen to. Anything Gaboche might say could hardly have irritated Dacre more than the mere sight of him. Was it men like these he had made his masters? Was it on men like these he was to lavish his money—his money, indeed.

They placed themselves at table, but although the dinner was good, the appetite was wanting. Gaboche's digestion indeed was of that marvellous order that seems a Parisian speciality; a digestion that works *tant bien que mal* in absolute independence of vigour of body, or tranquillity of mind, and he certainly packed away large quantities of food. But he did it, giving as little of his mind to the matter as the swine who voraciously empties his trough fast as it is filled. He drank deep too, which the others did not. Ralph and Asgill had each to cool themselves if possible, and they freely sprinkled the fever that scorched them within with long draughts of hock-laced seltzer.

So long as the servant remained in the room, the conversation rolled or rather jolted over indifferent topics. The man was stupid; that was why Asgill kept him. Yet he had quite sense enough to know that the trio he attended were far from being on such pleasant

terms as they wished it to appear. When he withdrew at last, and the gentlemen lit their cigars, Asgill felt it was no use keeping up the farce of indifference for another moment. Besides he was at least as eager to get the business over as Ralph could be; to find out what he and his friend had to look to.

"An exceedingly ugly thing this crash coming just when it has done. I can't conceive what these Indian banks are thinking of, when they give the credit they do in the East."

"*You* can't complain of their having been much more prudent at home, Asgill."

There was a brief silence. Then Asgill reverted to the previous question.

"Yes; it is exceedingly awkward; nothing can be more ill-timed,"

"Ill-timed, perhaps," rejoined Ralph; "it often is inconvenient paying money; but you always assured me when I arranged these matters for you with the board, that there could never be a question about your meeting your engagements. With me it is different. I am chairman, and my character in a manner compromised. I am a large shareholder, and, in any case, must suffer heavily."

He knew the strength of his antagonist's position well, and had a heavy presentiment he should be utterly unable to force it. In any case, however, he owed it to himself to try, and moreover, resistance now might serve him later. Asgill's reply did not tend to reassure him. That gentleman was very anxious for himself, and by no means the man to hesitate about using or abusing the advantages he possessed.

"Circumstances change, Dacre, and I am sure I need not tell you, of all men in the world, that they

may change so as to make our engagements too much for the most far-sighted of us. No one can possibly know better than you that it often is inconvenient to pay money—excessively inconvenient.”

He weighed out his words, weighting them with a world of suppressed meaning and menace. So much so, that his manner interpreted them to M. Gaboche, who could not precisely follow their sense. The Frenchman smoothed his flabby face into a smile of grim approval.

Ralph, at least, perfectly comprehended anything that may have escaped Gaboche. He was seated under the screw; the cold beads of perspiration started out on his hot forehead; one symptom of serious resistance, and another turn might crush him. He had had a lingering idea, before he came to the dinner, that Asgill might have clung to the shadow of social position that remained to him still, and might have shrunk, for his own sake, from the certainty of exposures he would have found unpleasant. That hope deserted him now. It seemed clear that Asgill declined the extravagance of preserving for himself anything so illusory at so heavy a price as 37,000*l.* On his conscience Dacre could not blame him. It was plain that, let Asgill act as he pleased, Gaboche was resolved that Dacre should drag him out of his difficulties even if he perished himself in doing it. No; the screw was in desperate hands, and nothing left him but to execute himself with what grace he could, after doing his best to secure something of a compromise. As he meditated, Gaboche lent it a slight twist that gave him warning of what he might expect—a twist that thrilled him to the marrow of his pride. He was in the hands of the tormentors. Asgill figured as Monsieur de Paris in the prison, the sworn executioner

of distinguished manners, who preserved every regard for the unlucky victim of his torture tools. Gaboche was the brutal *aide*, with greasy jerkin and blood-flecked arms, who thought torture a business like another, and racked flesh and blood as he would have broken stones or ground coffee.

"But Asgill, why squander your breath? Mr. Dacre is of our intimate friends; we have been in too many good affairs together, that he should leave us in the lurch now. He will pay; oh, be sure he will pay. There is so long time that we knew him—and knew him well. '*Cre nom de Dieu!*' wo hold this dear Mr. Dacre; *voyez vous?*'"

And Gaboche leered hideously, and closed his teeth with a vicious snap, as if they had met in the calf of the flying Dacre. He leaned his bristly head across the table, glared out of his half-closed eyes, and shook his imperialed chin with savage determination in Dacre's face, while he squeezed his fat thumbs down upon the table, as if his quondam ally lay beneath the close-bitten nails.

"Forgive me, gentlemen," exclaimed Ralph, making an effort, assuming with indifferent success, as he felt, an air of surprise and injured innocence, and attempting a final rally that he felt beforehand must be hopeless; "forgive me, but it is only the conviction that M. Gaboche conceives he has a cause for his extraordinary excitement, which enables me to overlook his offensive demeanour. That I might be willing to assist you as a friend through our common difficulty is possible. You must see, on calmer reflection, it is out of the question I should yield to a manner that amounts to menace."

Asgill laid his hand on the arm of Gaboche, who

would have broken out again already, had he not paused to wipe the foam that was gathering on his lips.

"You must forgive something to our friend Gaboche, as you say, Dacre: something to me, too, if I should do or say anything to need your consideration. Gaboche's passion is misdirected, I own, for he has no personal griefs against you, unless, indeed, that he may think with me, you prolonged our painful suspense needlessly, when we had looked for your hurrying forward to offer us sympathy and assistance. But what will you, as Gaboche would say? The world does not assist at our interview, and we need have no secrets from each other. What! by trusting us with yours, you have given as material guarantee for your discretion and famous secrets, too. I'm speaking Gaboche's thoughts, and, as you see, I can't help expressing myself in his idioms. Yes, we have your secrets, and we offer you ours, so far as you don't guess them already. The luck has been against the one or the other of us for long. We have been propping ourselves against your shoulder and the walls of the 'Metropolitan and Oriental.' Paff! you totter of a sudden, and your bank goes down. We slip from our supports, and find ourselves struggling among the ruins, very likely to be buried for good."

"Which means in English," exclaimed Ralph, venting his temper for a second, although he knew too well he'd better keep it——

"Which means in English that we must look to you for a helping hand. Gaboche and I, even throwing away all our property at ruinous depreciation can no more pay the 60,000*l.*—70,000*l.*—what is it? we owe between us, than we can defray the national debt. And we don't mean to make the sacrifice, when

all we need is time, and we have a kind friend who can assist us to it. Eh, Gaboche, have I reason?"

Gaboche, never taking his hungry eyes off Dacre, nodded assent, although he only guessed what passed.

"Yes; you owe 66,000*l.* between you, I believe, as you say; and where in the world, gentlemen, do you expect I am to find it? I, who owe heavy debts of my own to the bank, and have just suffered grievously by the collapse of the shares? These shares you forced me—recommended me, I mean—to keep," exclaimed Ralph, and he regarded Asgill more fiercely than Gaboche had looked at him, and with a far more settled passion.

Asgill quailed, and resented quailing. He looked sullenly into the wine-glass, that shook in his fingers, as he rejoined, "The sum would be serious to another man, I know; but can you, the wealthy proprietor of Heppenstall and Allonby talk of difficulty in finding it? I have never known you at a loss for money in any quantity, since the reading of your stepmother's will seemed to bring you luck." He threw a half-apprehensive glance at Ralph when he had done. He jerked his head back nervously when he saw Ralph raise his hand, as if he had feared it might have clutched the neck of the heavy decanter. Nor would anyone who had seen Ralph's face, have said the apprehension was altogether causeless. But Ralph had only lifted the hand to press it for a moment to his throbbing forehead. As he covered up the ominous fires of his eyes, Asgill exchanged looks with Gaboche, and read, in his confederate's somewhat crestfallen features, a reflection of his own fears. They had driven their man to bay, and they did not altogether fancy the situation. They were the masters, it is true, and safe to abuse their power if he listened to the counsels of prudence, but then despair

might be busy at his ear. They had gone as far as they dared with the *fortiter in modo*; it was time to try something of the *suaviter*.

The Frenchmann was the first to speak. Genuine fear had sobered the intoxication of his anger, and Ralph's ugly looks and manner had cowed him even more thoroughly than Asgill.

"Gently, there, Asgill, gently, there, Mr. Dacre, we are wrong, all the three of us, and I, Gaboche, who showed my temper the first, am the first to avow it. See, the situation is grave, and we have all three been passionate. What then? When an honest man has been in the wrong he is bound to say it. I ask your pardon, Dacre, if my words have been hasty; let us forget the past except so far as it throws light on the situation, and arrange the affairs of business we met to arrange; it will be the matter of a moment."

"Gaboche speaks the truth, Dacre and nothing should be more easy," said Asgill. "The fact is, we have all said more than we meant to say or thought. It is the more regrettable that, as we learned, you expressed yourself resolved to come to our assistance at the first meeting of your board."

"Of whom did they learn it?" thought Ralph. "Smouch I suppose: scoundrels are sure to league themselves."

Scoundrels league themselves! Ah, Mr. Dacre, how was it you were sitting at table with Asgill and Gaboche, and in your present relations with them? "It is true," he went on aloud, "that I may have dropped some unconsidered words: what they were I scarcely remember now. Nothing more natural than that I should say something for the credit of my acquaintances when I heard it attacked."

"You spoke in a very friendly manner, and, speaking in these circumstances, it amounted to more than it might have done at another time. At least, I have reason to know that the board accepted you as pledging your credit for ours. That is the case, is it not? Let us look the matter in the face, Dacre. Your good nature, for which we are very grateful, has doubly engaged you with us."

"Oui, c'est ça," exclaimed Gaboche. Ralph made but a feeble gesture of dissent. He knew they must compromise, and thought he had better have the wretched business over while he had established some salutary respect with his desperate acquaintances.

"Yes, we stand engaged to each other; but neither more or less than we have always been," proceeded Asgill. "After all, what do we ask of you? Only temporary accomodation to enable us to tide over this pressing difficulty. Arrange the payment of our debts to the bank, and receive in exchange the transfer of our formal acknowledgments of indebtedness. You save our credit, you enable us to pull ourselves round; we have excellent irons in the fire that must come out well; you shall be no loser in the end, and you will have done us a turn we shall never forget."

"Parfaitement," chimed in M. Gaboche, approvingly.

To cut a conversation short that lasted some time longer, the arrangement ended much as Dacre had foreseen it must end; perhaps something more favourably for himself. At least, his "friends" had come to treat him with something like their old respect and affection before they separated. M. Gaboche himself said he deplored the necessity of accepting such an advance, if it at all inconvenienced his dear Dacre;

but, in accepting it, he should task himself to observe all the management possible for his benefactor. In truth, both he and Asgill grew gradually friendly in reality. They were saved for the time, and the reaction made them lighthearted and good-humoured. Ralph read this story of their feelings, and the more he felt they were cheering up at his expense, the more his gall gathered. The more sincerely friendly they were, the more cordially he hated them in his heart. Yet he strove hard to put some faith in the words—to believe in the soundness of the chances they made so much of, and the validity of their stamped acknowledgments of debt. Now that the affair was as good as settled, he turned recklessly to the wine decanters—turned the more recklessly that he felt he might have swallowed a gallon of Asgill's heady Burgundy and still remained as sober as a Moslem saint. They assured him that his credit would float him comfortably till they struggled out of their present difficulties, and could come to his rescue in their recovered strength. He tried to believe it, and believed it for the moment with a violent effort of his will, although he knew all the time, in the depths of his heart, he would wake on the morrow a despairing sceptic. His credit—whence did it come? Asgill and Gaboche—if they found themselves millionaires, were they men to pay to-morrow any more than to-day? Or, accepting his sacrifice as made, and for ever, was this the end of their exactions, or the beginning? Which was the more likely?

CHAPTER X.

HARDCASTLE MINISTERS TO THE MIND DISEASED.

His awakening next morning was all he feared, and more. The wine he had swallowed with impunity at the time, had acted as an opiate to dull his pain and lull him to heavy slumbers. He woke, and his pains, or rather the dim sense of the agonies that were coming, woke with him. He felt like the man who comes struggling through the fumes of chloroform out of some terrible operation that has maimed him hopelessly for life. He was awake and yet asleep. He saw everything with preternatural clearness through a black darkness that might be felt. The shock upon shock of successive sensations charged his battered mind as if it had palpitated to the streams of an electric battery. While it busied itself with the terrible present it went ranging back among the memories of the buried past, and along a thousand pleasant paths that might have led him to Paradise if he had not turned from them in his stupidity. It sought to hurry him towards a lowering future, from which he strove shudderingly to avert his gaze. Nothing but abysses, whose gloomy depths he dared not fathom, could lie before him there. Nothing but abysses, unless a miracle came to his help; and who was he, unrepentant although remorseful, that miracles should be wrought for his happiness?

Some twenty thousand pounds to be found and paid—found and paid for the men he hated and despised the most on earth; that was the great fact, before which

his personal debt to the bank, and his direct loss by its shares, sunk into insignificance. And his sister, Miss Dacre, had been a considerable shareholder, although she held in Mr. Dacre's name. How many of the shares were hers, how many his, in that partnership? He had never calculated precisely when all went well, and it was an awkward time to do it now. He loved his sister, and loved himself and was scarcely an unbiassed judge: not that it greatly signified. How was the 70,000*l.*, or 60,000*l.* to be provided? Alice Dacre and Gaboche—what an unholy and unnatural partnership. What devil had wedded the two so indissolubly in his mind that the thought of the one always called up the other, that angel whom he had revered more than anything on earth, loved better than he had ever loved Edith Boycott, and the wretch made of the vilest of Parisian gutter mud that had ever been run out in a golden mould. It was Gaboche and Asgill who were now damning him in his own eyes, because they threatened to damn him in his sister's. It was Gaboche and Asgill who had come between him and Edith Boycott, and Barham and its respectable wealth, when they tendered him the fatal fruit that had poisoned his happiness and set his teeth on edge. It was Gaboche and Asgill who were bent on tumbling him down from the false position he held in his sister's eyes and the world's—and—"

And he might have thought and soliloquized himself into suicide, but a knock came to the door. Roper entered unannounced, and his master so far recovered his self-control as not to receive him with the execration that rose to his lips. But a duller lad than that sharp-witted servant might have read sufficient in his master's face to set his curiosity on its sharpest edge—a curiosity

already excited by the circumstance that his master, after a long coolness, had dined yesterday at Mr. Asgill's house.

"Mr. Hardcastle, sir, is below. I told him you were not up yet, and he asked if he should wait till you came down."

Mr. Hardcastle was certainly the only man in the world Mr. Dacre would have consented to see in the circumstances, except, perhaps, Asgill or Gaboche, who had found the Sesame to his privacy at all times Mr. Hardcastle was positively welcome, for he represented that early freshness of adventures in which Ralph might once again cool his fevered brain and frame.

"Beg Mr. Hardcastle to wait till I come down. Serve him breakfast immediately."

It was now eleven o'clock, and Mr. Hardcastle was an early man in his habits. But his was the foreign practice of *déjeuner à la fourchette*, and Roper, who knew his ways, soon saw him served with the omelette, the cutlets, the bottle of Pouilly, and all the rest of it. Roper and he were old friends. Hardcastle, going back to early days, might still call the menial Jim without insulting his dignity.

"Mr. Dacre's late to-day, Jim; ill, eh?"

"Not that I know of, Mr. Hardcastle; at least, he was well enough yesterday. But he dined at Mr. Asgill's, and they sat very late."

Mr. Hardcastle whistled faintly. His was not the overstrained delicacy that shrinks from pumping a servant if it desires to come at a fact. He felt far too friendly towards Ralph and Alice not to dislike Ralph's relations with Asgill. He knew it was not Ralph's practice to exceed in wine, and this late morning after that late night seemed rather ominous to him.

Roper nodded in answer to the whistle.

Hardcastle thrust his hands well down into his pockets, and leaned himself back in his chair. "Mr. Dacre seen much of Mr. Asgill lately?"

"Little or nothing at all, sir," responded Roper, demurely; "and I shouldn't wonder if that was the reason why they sat together so late last night. Mr. Asgill has been coming after Mr. Dacre a good deal lately,—he and that French gentleman,—as often as two or three times a day. But they had no luck: never found him either here or at his club."

Something more to the same effect passed between the two. Hardcastle, although not over delicate, was too old a hand to let Roper do more than suspect that he was being pumped on his master's concerns. Nor, to do him justice, would he have ever run the risk of letting him surmise so much as that, had he not believed in the man. Roper had his faults—faults of manner and impudence; but Martin Hardcastle fancied he knew he was to be trusted, so, having elicited what he desired to know, he forthwith lost himself in thought. As we have hinted, he was pretty deep in Ralph's concerns; he had been at Allonby, and he had visited Heppenstall and had seen Müller in the course of his professional journeys. He had thrust his head almost as far round behind the scenes as Asgill; and while Asgill indulged a keen personal interest in Mr. Dacre's concerns, Hardcastle, who had attached himself paternally to Alice, lost no opportunity of satisfying the more disinterested curiosity that beset him. In the course of a chequered life he had, at least, learned that all is not gold that glitters. No wonder that, with his lights, he was somewhat sceptical as to the seeming prosperity of his friend Dacre. He knew the Dacre family must be

pretty heavily interested in the bank of which Ralph had been chairman, and as one is disposed to magnify the unknown, perhaps his sombre fancy outstripped the unpleasant reality. He did not know how far Messrs. Asgill and Gaboche had been connected with it, but they had been closely concerned with Dacre in many a financial speculation, and their coming after him now seemed an ugly circumstance. Uglier still, that Dacre should first avoid them almost pusillanimously, then grant them a long confidential interview over the dinner-table, and suffer so much from its consequences.

“Dacre is not the man to be driven unless they have the goad well fixed in him. When Asgill drives, the devil drives; and to be driven by Gaboche—why, I, Martin Hardcastle, would sooner wring the little ruffian’s bull-neck—always supposing one could get hold of it—if I were to stand next day at the Old Bailey bar for murder. And Dacre’s not longer in the temper than I am, if I know him; and altogether I don’t like it. I wonder what Alice would think if she knew all—her brother’s troubles. Gad! here he comes.”

The intelligent Roper had learned at least as much from Hardcastle, as Hardcastle had got out of him; for it was the veteran adventurer’s practice to concentrate his energy on the business of the moment and dispose of it straight out of hand. When that business was connected with the victualling department, it was least likely to suffer by backwardness. Now Hardcastle had eaten abstractedly while talking, and when he had taken to meditating gravely, had hardly eaten at all. He had left the wine almost untasted, although the first sip might have assured him it was much superior to the vintages with which men generally wash down ordinary

déjeneurs à la fourchette. And at Ralph's approach, instead of rising to meet him, or at least giving him greeting in one shape or another, Hardcastle threw himself guiltily on the cutlets, dashed himself out a great beakerful of Burgundy, and pretended to be absorbed in his meal. Ralph's cheekbones were flushed, and his heavy eyes were slightly bloodshot. You could have told at a glance he had dissipated the evening before, and had been sleeping fitfully. Any of his familiars must have guessed that something out of the common had upset him from his usual grooves, and that racking thoughts had as much to do with his looks as excess in wine. His condition being an abnormal one, and having no precedent to guide him in his behaviour, of course, he did a foolish thing. He tried to impose on Hardcastle, and carry things off lightly with violent effort at gaiety.

"What, Hardcastle, have you come here on purpose to tantalize me with the vision of your wolfish appetite and insatiable swallow, when I am paying bitterly for a heavy dinner, and at least as much wine as was good for me?"

Then, on second thought, he recollected he was playing the hypocrite to no purpose: he remembered he would not have seen Hardcastle at all had it not been for the irresistible longing for something like a half-confidence with the man who represented something different from his vile artificial life. He saw, besides, in Hardcastle's expressive face, embarrassment at having thrust himself into an unexpected confidence mixed with some very real concern. His preternaturally sharpened faculties told him, moreover, that his guest's affectation of appetite had been assumed, and that his own entrance must have disturbed Hardcastle from

a reverie of which Mr. Dacre and his concerns had been the theme. So, with a weary sigh, he dropped his awkwardly-fitting manner, and let his mask slip. He almost wished he could cast it off altogether for the moment, but that, of course, was out of the question.

Hardcastle saw at a glance that his reserved friend was in a humour to enter the confessional and be frank—with reservations. Whether he had been in that disposition or not, Hardcastle's blunt nature would have owed it to itself to give him the opportunity. As it was, Ralph's remark, coupled with his visible depression, made things perfectly easy. So Hardcastle broke out heartily:—

“Confound it, Dacre; no use humbugging with an old friend, and something more than a friend. If you happen to recollect, each of us has saved the other's life in his time.”

“Worse luck,” groaned Ralph audibly; the truth is, he was terribly unstrung.

Hardcastle caught the interjection, and went on as if it had escaped him.

“Saved the other's life in our time, and I owe you my present livelihood to boot; the only one that suited me so well as to keep me certainly respectable. There's more the matter than last night's dinner and its wine. Of course you have been hard hit in that Metropolitan and Oriental affair; I know that much. You wouldn't naturally be sitting late at a dinner so soon after the crash; and I have no doubt you dined in disagreeable company, and talked unpleasant business over your olives—eh? Nothing so bad for the digestion—makes you see everything is black, ten times laid on.”

He waited for an answer, but Ralph sat thinking what and how much he should say. Hardcastle went on, after a pause, and improvised a falsehood to serve his purpose.

"I saw Asgill yesterday——"

Ralph winced as if the other had thrown his fork at him. The wince betrayed him fatally as he fancied, and left him no option but to try relieving himself with the partial confidence he hesitated over.

"So did I, d—n him. Look here, Hardcastle, anything I tell you of course, goes no further."

Hardcastle held out his hand, to give solemnity to the assurance that that was understood.

"I dined with him yesterday: with him and that beast Gaboche. The fact is, we were partners in money-making for long, and in our lucky days we backed bills and put our hands freely to paper for each other. Now comes the deluge, and I find myself not only over head and ears, but with those two fellows pumped out and clinging to me. So long as they save themselves they don't care a farthing whether I sink or swim. They owe money to the bank. They are ruined, and can't book up; and all the losses of the partnership fall on me."

Thus Mr. Dacre made his confidence tolerably adroitly, without admitting his friend to those secrets of the prison-house that Asgill and Gaboche so darkly hinted at. For these he substituted—plausible enough—the statement that his sign-manual had been actually set to the engagement his quondam allies lay under to the Metropolitan and Oriental; that the Bank's hold upon him was a moral and not a legal one; but that as for him, as he felt bound to pay, it was equally unpleasant.

So far as the explanation went, it accounted to Hardcastle for his host's depression, and obtained him the necessary sympathy. So far as it went, however, it gave Hardcastle ample food for suspicious reflection. In the first place, if his younger friend, with all his resources and self-confidence, was so heavily cast down, he must surely be tottering on the very brink of ruin, if indeed the fatal plunge were not inevitable. In the second, he had always been curious as to these relations of Ralph's with Asgill and Gaboche; and when that usually self-possessed gentleman expressed himself so bitterly and pettishly, he must surely have some more stinging grief against his confederates, than the simple discharge of a joint-engagement. And last, but not least, for it fell in with the very train of thought he was following, was Ralph ruined and desperate, the man Lady Dacre would have pitched upon to be the irresponsible guardian of her confiding daughter's interest.

Hardcastle was sorely torn in his mind. He was devoted to Alice, but independently of owing Ralph the debt of gratitude he fully recognized, he liked him personally. He remembered well the few eventful days that had followed their acquaintance in Italy, the common dangers they had run. He had his sympathies with that wild side in Dacre's character, known only to him, but which was often in revolt against the conventionalities to which Dacre had made himself a slave. In short, he saw a comrade he was bound to in difficulties and trouble, and he resolved to try his hand at cheering him if he could do nothing more.

"You're hipped and bothered, Ralph, and, I grant you, not without reason. Never mind, and never say die. The world's wide enough, and if London treats

you ill, you can always break with it. At any rate, you're looking on the black side of things now through the fumes of last night's wine and tobacco, and the memory of last night's company. I've acted doctor on occasions. Let me prescribe for you for once. It's nearly twelve o'clock. Have some brandy and soda and a devil. Order round a couple of horses: the weather's lovely. We'll leave town the nearest way, and go for a gallop into the Surrey lanes. When we've found our appetite we'll dine quietly at some snug pothouse on the Thames, and come home in the cool of the evening. Eh, what do you say?"

The most elaborate consolation Hardcastle could have supplied would not have cheered Ralph so much as the suggestion that the world was wide, and there were other worlds than London? it chimed so absolutely with his reckless humour. He felt the proposal offered him at once a stimulant and narcotic that would at least dull his pain and calm him for the time being. So he closed readily with the proposal, merely stipulating that Hardcastle should let him have half-an-hour first for unavoidable business. Hardcastle consented, reluctantly.

"If you must, you must; but I consent only on condition I don't lose sight of you. I'll ring for Roper and hear you order the horses; then I'll sit here commanding the passage and the door, and give you leave of absence in your own room, with breakfast, blue devils and business for precisely half-an-hour—well three quarters—and then *pas de sursis*—off we go."

Dacre's pressing business was the writing to Barham. He had deferred replying to his sister's frequent and lengthy letters, he had never answered Madame de Chaillot's pregnant communication profoundly as it had interested him. Indeed what was passing there con-

cerned him so deeply, that he had fully intended to find time to go and see and act in person. Now worn from last night's work, he felt that out of the question for the moment. Independently of the urgent, ugly business that kept him in town, he was in no mood to meet his sister for the moment. He felt utterly unequal either to exerting his authority as a guardian, or seething the kid in its maternal milk, swaying her by his affection as a brother. The uneventful life of a calm domestic circle; the society of happy people with no more bothers than might give piquancy to the joys of their existence, would have been intolerable purgatory to him. So he thrust his scarcely-tasted breakfast aside, and drew pen and paper towards him.

Usually his pen travelled swiftly enough, and when he wrote to Alice, it flew of itself. He had lived so much in all that interested her, and so many of their ideas were shared in common. Why was it then that this time his pen refused to move, and planted itself as firmly at—"My darling Alice, I" as the prophet's donkey on the road that led to Moabitish honours? He tried again and again, spoiled three sheets of note-paper, and threw the pen down in disgust. He might as well put his letter off: to-morrow would do just as well. But he must write Madame de Chaillot—must, for many reasons—time was hurrying forward if he was not, and Hardcastle would soon be impatient. So he took heart of grace and dashed at that.

"DEAR MADAME DE CHAILLOT,—

"I think you were wise in selling the Mexican Bonds, and in my opinion you could do no better than by Credit Mobiliers. They may mean gambling in these times, but with such a friend at Court as Tereire,

you ought to play on velvet. I only wish I could have brought you my counsels in person, as I had hoped; and renewed a friendship which has been so much interrupted since you expatriated yourself. But business, and unpleasant business, detains me here, although each day I get up with the idea of finding my way to Barham.

"Alice has told us all about her adventure and her champion, and, shall I confess it, has made me a little uneasy. This is strictly between ourselves; and I must appeal to the memory of that old friendship of ours to ask you to keep it so. Alice, of course, in her innocence means nothing, but this Captain Bourke may; and I fancy, as a friend and an accomplished woman of the world, you suspect he does. I know little of him; but what little I know is, by no means, in his favour. I need not tell you Alice would be a rich prize for an adventurer. I hope that already you know her well enough to think her too good to be thrown away."

A violent knock at the door, and "Time's up!" from Hardcastle.

"All right—five minutes more!" shouted Ralph in return, and continued.

"I feel I can trust everything to your tact, and much to your kindness; and if you can do anything to save Alice's happiness pray do it. I am confident you are incapable of hurting her susceptibilities.

"Believe me,

"Dear Madame de Chaillot,

"Yours very sincerely."

In this hurried note of his Ralph, with different motives, had been guilty of a couple of falsehoods. He had said he had heard all about the adventure and the

champion from Alice ; whereas, he was ominously conscious she had been suspiciously reticent as to the one or the other. He had said he had heard things unfavourable to Bourke, whereas, he had never heard anything at all of this new dragon who was uncoiling himself across his path. But then the whole communication was as ill-considered as it was hasty. His brain was too exhausted to exert itself in weighing words, conjuring up consequences, and disposing of them. He had no spirit to finesse, or he might not have been half so frank, or committed himself on paper to what must have seemed like treachery to his confiding sister. Had he not enlisted a comparative stranger and a crafty woman of the world as his ally in the unacknowledged love-affair she would have blushed to breathe to him. More than once, as he rode by Hardcastle's side in abstracted silence, he regretted having dropped that letter in the post.

Whatever Hardcastle's *arrière pensée* as to plumbing the darker depths in the troubled mind of his friend, his first idea for the moment was the kindly wish to cheer him.

Hardcastle, by nature, was rather taciturn than voluble ; but with Dacre he had always been in the habit of relaxing. Now fresh air and exhilarating exercise did the work of wine and the genial atmosphere of a midnight smoking-room. His tongue was loosed, and he rattled away until he hurried his pre-occupied friend along with him, and both had half-forgotten the present in the wild excitement of the past. As they cantered their horses on Wimbledon Common, as they walked them along the leafy avenues of Richmond Park, under the horse chestnuts of Bushey and Hampton, they were grappling death by the throat among

the Apennines, in the Spanish Sierras, or beneath the blazing skies of the torrid zone.

"After all, Hardcastle, say what you like, you never enjoy life so much as when you are near the losing it. I don't know that I was ever happier than in that short struggle on the bastion at Rome. The worst of these pleasures are they are too violent to last; with the best luck you can only have them once or twice in a lifetime, and you have no time to *savourer* them."

"I suppose they *are* jolly. One does delight in looking back on them; but I frankly tell you, Dacre, I should be sorry to look forward to a long programme of the sort for the future. If you have the time to study the features of death, they're devilish repulsive, let me tell you."

"True, even when you count the time by minutes—as, for example, that affair of ours with the scoundrels at Presenzano. I have seldom been less comfortable in my mind than when you potted that hair-lipped villain."

"I suppose I have as much pluck as most men, or what serves one's turn pretty nearly as well. Yet to me a fight's like a dinner: you want pleasant company, and plenty of it, to make it enjoyable. Then it is good for one, and, as you say, Dacre, you live. Until I actually drop into it, I believe I never came nearer stepping into my coffin than in that affair with Zumalacarreguy in Guipuzcoa—figuratively speaking, of course, for coffins were as scarce as coin in our campaign with the Carlists. By heaven, sir! it was glorious. There we were, a few hundreds of us, half sheltered by the oak scrub; field-pieces from the cliffs above showering their shot through the branches; the red winter leaves splashed with the redder blood; while ten of the Christinos for every one of us,

came stumbling down over the precipices, tripping over the men among them we dropped, and swarming up to our rusty bayonets. The sheer force of their rush carried us with them at the last, and there we were, Carlist and Christino, higgledy-piggledy, cut, thrust, stab, and pistol-shot, the enemy mad—for our friends were driving them, and they had Gomez and Ituralde sticking hard in their skirts.”

“That was the worst thing you ever were in, or the best, as you like to take it.”

“The nearest thing, perhaps, and yet I don’t know; we had more time to think of it by Revilla, on the Rio Grande; and, in that affair, I doubt if the most speculative of your last insurance companies would have had our lives upon any terms. There were half a hundred of us in a chapparal of prickly pear and thorn, when our sentinel sloped, and sold us to Santa Anna; and there were four Mexican battalions and a regiment of lancers—not that horse counted for much among the thorn *chevaux-de-frise*—the whole pack giving tongue, and hammering away at us, and threatening to chop us up in the chapparal. Our fellows shot straight, luckily—scarcely a man of them but could draw a bead on a squirrel’s eye at a hundred yards; but the ‘Yellow-bellies’ knew our number, and, fermenting with the heat and the *aguardiente* and their own infernal noise, they came on for very shame, and closed in upon us in spite of our fire.”

“But you came through it?”

“Apparently. We kept the place somehow through the longest day I ever spent, till the wounded Mexicans lay as thick as crushed ants in the fringe of the jungle, shrieking for water as they went slowly mad under the blazing sun. At last we had to stop our ears, though

we wanted all our sympathy for ourselves, and all our fingers for the rifle locks. Then at night we made tracks, passed over the bodies of their out-looks, kept up a running fight with their cavalry till riderless mustangs were to be had by scores for the catching, and two-thirds of us turned up next morning at headquarters tolerably safe and intolerably thirsty."

So they went on: from Mexico to Syria, from Syria to the Argentine Republic, surprising Pachas on the night march, cutting out armed brigantines from shallow water, under shot and shell from forts. The old landlord, who waited on them at the snug little inn at Halliford, where they had their modest dinner, puzzled himself sorely to guess what manner of truculent desperadoes these might be who masqueraded in the sheep's clothing provided by West-end tailors. Ralph Dacre laughed aloud, once or twice, as his eyes lighted on the man's curious, horror-stricken countenance. For the time being, Ralph was in spirits he had not enjoyed for weeks, although if ever man had gone out riding with black care behind him, it was he. But he had managed to drop his grim companion somewhere in the course of the gallop. Occasionally a dark shadow fell across his mind, and his heart sank within him for a moment as he felt that he and care were doomed to forgather again. But his nerves were restrung and his mind rebraced; and he felt equal to the effort of enjoying the present under the shadow of the future. He was thoroughly grateful to Hardcastle, who had brought him relief when his mind seemed sickened past the ministering to. Hardcastle saw it, and felt towards him in the kindly spirit of a benefactor.

"After all, and with all his faults, he's too good a fellow to be worried by wolves of his own breeding,"

soliloquised that gentleman. "I would gladly help him if I could, but how the deuce to do it? I shrewdly suspect he won't make a clean breast of it—can't, at least, which is more to the purpose—and if I go pulling at doors he wants to keep shut, we shall have the blue devils in upon us, before we know where we are, and the devil himself to pay into the bargain."

It was Ralph himself who helped him out of his embarrassment.

"Do you know, Hardcastle, I sometimes think I'm a fool to stay in England where everything and everybody is so rich and respectable and rascally, when there's so much fun going elsewhere. Eh, what do you think? you've tried one and the other more than most men."

Now Hardcastle had tried one and the other; and, although he looked back on occasions, on these life and death scrambles and hardship with the complacency with which a reformed *roué* regards the scandalous vices of his youth, yet he had a wholesome horror of the swine-trough he had come so near feeding from. If he had spoken his honest mind, he would have said the Halliford chops and pale ale were infinitely preferable to husks and ditch-water, and that grovelling on your waistcoat in a struggle for existence among pigs, was neither a dignified or a comfortable attitude for a gentleman on the shady side of thirty. But at the present moment, it appeared to him highly desirable that Ralph should break with his London life, and the costly responsibilities of the fancied position he held there; highly desirable for him, and not undesirable, perhaps, for his sister, notwithstanding the affection they bore each other. So he rejoined—

"It's according to circumstances, and there's a good

deal to be said for one life and the other. Now that you've burned your fingers in that unlucky bank business, and been hard hit by those rich respectable, and rascally friends of yours, I should be inclined to say, go. Break with town here for the time, pitch position, privileges, and responsibilities to the mischief, and let water run into the well to replace what has been running out."

Ralph's brows clouded over at this allusion to his money troubles, but when he saw that Hardcastle never looked his way, they slightly cleared again.

"Replace what money has been running out," resumed that gentleman, after a pause he made with intention. "You know you can leave your sister in excellent hands, and take a run somewhere with an easy mind."

"Your sister!" Ralph started. Although it really was his sister who was at the bottom of all his cares; living in fancy another life than his London one, for the moment he had utterly forgotten her existence. He wanted no more telling proof of the strength of his anxieties and the depth of his pre-occupations, and the evidence shocked him. Now the phantom Alice the thought evoked, had more of the fiend than the angel, and sat his rising spirits like a night-mare;—how things were changed with him;—and behind her this unknown Bourke hovered in the back-ground, instinct with menacing life.

Hardcastle remarked the start, and could not resist the opportunity of learning something of what he longed, yet feared to know; of confirming what he suspected.

"And then—pardon an old friend's freedom, Ralph—then your sister must marry speedily, in the course

of things, and leave you more your own master than ever."

Ralph started more violently than before, as if his friend had rudely touched the wound that was smarting and rankling in his heart. Nay, more, as Hardcastle looked up, he saw something approaching ferocity in the other's eyes; but, although usually prompt enough to ire, he did not resent the look. On the contrary, he gave his head a sad, although almost imperceptible, shake, relapsed into silence, and drummed with his fingers on the table.

Ralph, always sufficiently sharp, and with his faculties preternaturally sharpened, appreciated the forbearance and understood the silence. He flushed as if he had just betrayed some discreditable secret under the seal of confession, and waited as if he were anxious to hear how his ghostly counsellor had received it. Hardcastle did not keep him waiting long, and when he did speak, his tone was almost more friendly than before, certainly softer than its usual. And when he spoke, he assumed quietly that Ralph was not only temporarily but seriously embarrassed—an assumption Ralph had given him no reason for in so many words—and Ralph listened to the assumption, and tacitly assented to it.

"Why do you not turn yourself and your thoughts more to Germany, Ralph? It always seemed to me that, with careful looking after, there might be more got out of that. I daresay Müller is honest, or you would have found him out; otherwise I'd swear he had secrets he was keeping from you."

"I don't believe it for a moment, Hardcastle. The property tells its own story plainly enough. Besides, I am not too much given to a blind faith in human

nature; but, trust me, old Müller is thoroughly attached to the family. So much so, that he has never quite forgiven the share he fancies I had in hurrying my poor grandfather's end. He loved the old man, and he only deals fairly by me and no more; but fairly he does deal, I'm convinced."

"Well, it may be so, and in any case you should know best. But what I was saying was this,— why not try and get something more out of Heppenstall?"

By this time it scarcely occurred to Ralph that it was anything strange his friend taking for granted that the Heppenstall rents brought him in little or nothing. So he answered quietly—

"Unless I bring down the woods, and I should be sorry it came to that, to say nothing of great part of the timber being mortgaged—unless I brought down the woods about the castle, I really don't believe there's more to be made of it. Müller's found it hard enough work making the ends meet, and I had actually to send him the money to restore the south-west rooms and keep up the place tolerably decently."

"Then those loans to the estate; you have heard nothing more of the titles?"

Certainly Hardcastle had made good use of his tongue and ears in his flying visits to Ralph's domain, and had managed to assort, for his private reflection, most of the vague talk of the country.

"Not a word, nor never will, unless I draw Propfenzieher, and I freely confess I don't see my way to do that. Seeing he has nothing to do but keep quiet, he is altogether too much for me."

"Well, Ralph, perhaps you are right, but there's no knowing. You haven't moved seriously in the matter for long, and your chances may have improved in the

meantime. At any rate, you want change, and, for myself, I should rather like the novelty of a journey without being driven by the Foreign Office. What do you say to putting your matters in England here so much in train that nothing can go very far wrong for a fortnight. That confounded bank can't want actually to cut its pounds of flesh from its own chairman or his friends so quickly as all this comes to. Settle that business provisionally out of hand. Run down and see your sister at Barham. I'll manage to get leave—I dare say if I ask him Lord Wharfdale will help me to it—and we can be off in three days or so. And then if nothing comes of our trip, if you are as sick of England as ever, and long to brace yourself for a fresh start with a dip into wild life, why there is plenty of time to take it. Who knows? you may tempt me to leave my snug rack and manger, and break out again to kick up my heels on the prairies."

Hardcastle's idea jumped exactly with Ralph's present humour. Anything for change, and so much the better in his present state of uncertainty, if it were a change that committed him to nothing irretrievably. It was something to have a companion who knew or guessed at his woes, and stuck by him still. When they dismounted that night late at the stables in Hay Hill, and handed their horses over to the yawning groom, Ralph was lighter and happier than he could have deemed possible, and their ausflug to the Schwarzwald as good as settled. He looked forward with a certain resolution to another necessary interview with Gaboche and Asgill; to the pains of some provisional arrangement with the liquidators of the "Metropolitan and Oriental." He had actually summoned courage for a visit to Barham and his

sister. Courage to meet Alice: it had come to that. Events were travelling fast with him, when he made the finding it a matter for cheerful congratulation.

CHAPTER XI.

LUCKILY FOR ALICE, RALPH IS LATE AS USUAL.

PHILIP BOURKE must have been the most sceptical and self-depreciatory of men, had he retained much doubt about the state of Alice's feelings. A thousand little signs crowded on him daily and hourly, with confirmation strong as proof of holy writ. The frank glance that, as he surprised it, changed to shyness in its charming consciousness; the flush of sympathy mantling on her cheek as he fought out some amicable argument against her older friends; the instinctive tending towards his side in their rides or drives; the lowering of tone as she softened her voice for his ear; the complacency with which she submitted to interruption in a *tête-a-tête* with her pet authors, when she had withdrawn with them in solitary flirtation to the sanctuary of the neighbouring shrubberies. In the latter cases, indeed, sheltered under the chaperonage of the house, encouraged by the possibility of disturbance by intruders, she seemed to yield herself to her interviews with Bourke with the least reserve. It was then he felt most sanguine, that when he dared to shake the tree, the tempting fruit must fall into his longing arms.

Alice one morning had composed herself in her favourite seat, a volume of Tennyson in her hand, and

her eyes wandering listlessly among the bushes. The seat was meant to hold a couple very comfortably, but reclining luxuriously in one corner as she did then she made it impossible for any one to insinuate himself into the other. As she sat, a faint footfall, changing in the distance from the turf to the gravel, made her drop her eyes and rivet her attention on the work in her hand. She was only recalled from the idylls to the realities of life, when a black shadow blotted the bright sunlight from her pages.

Bourke, with all his Irish assurance, had no longer the face to apologize for the surprises and intrusions that had become matter-of-course every morning. Alice, looking up at him suddenly, would have played the hypocrite but indifferently, even had she not been betrayed by her blushes.

"I thought you intended going with Mr. Boycott and Mr. Rufford to the Rectory?"

"Not at all, Miss Dacre; they tried to press me, but I begged off. Rufford had an active fit, and insisted upon walking, and the day was far too hot for that. I feel fagged already."

He looked significantly at the vacant corner of the seat. Alice made room for him with decorous consideration, and he dropped easily into it.

"Yet you yourself proposed escorting Edith and the children, and myself, to the top of the park, this afternoon; you can't have forgotten? The walk to the Rectory is far more shady, and not steep in the least."

"Ah, that's a different matter altogether, Miss Dacre, and you may be quite sure I have not forgotten. I'm sure you never suspected me of forgetting," he said plaintively, and tried, although unsuccessfully, to

read her features. The attempt was so far satisfactory that he made her interpose the fringes of her parasol. "Besides, I detest going to the Rectory of all places." "Detest going to the Rectory? Dear me, Captain Bourke, I am sure it's charming so far as it goes; I really believe I like it better than Barham, although I should be sorry to say as much to Edith. And old Mr. Rufford is delightful. His daughter to be sure—"

"Well, and his daughter? What were you going to say of Madame de Chaillot, Miss Dacre? Pray go on. You know you may trust me."

"I don't like her. Nor does Edith, I am sure, although of course she won't say so. She is so cold, and so clever, and so artificial."

"It's ungrateful of me, for I owe her my introduction to the paradise I have found at Barham. It's ungrateful, perhaps, but for my part I detest her. The Rectory may be charming, but the idea of the cobra coiled among the foliage and flowers, would choke me off the loveliest shrub in the tropics."

Alice looked at him, rather surprised; she was quite aware he had no love for Madame de Chaillot; it had been one of the earliest ties of their common sympathy: but this unlooked for outbreak rather startled her with its vehemence.

"Only hatred for hatred, Miss Dacre, and she hates me cordially," he went on, answering the look, "but believe me it is not that."

Alice persisted in looking inquiry, and yet her heart fluttered, as if she half anticipated the answer. Philip Bourke's passing violence of manner had changed into a strongly suggestive tenderness. He bent over towards her, till he could see the reflection of his face dancing in the pupils of her hazel eyes. He stole out

one hand towards hers; perhaps it was the thickness of her gauntlet glove; perhaps it was the absence of her mind that suffered it to trifle lightly with her fingers.

"I dislike Madame de Chaillot, and I dread her, because she dislikes you, and will play you some evil turn if ever she has the chance. And who knows she may not. She is ever on the watch; that I can answer for, as you can. She is the cat all over, and will be safe to spring if ever she should be sure of her stroke. You must have seen her lift her paw and give a playful pat in that pretty manner of hers; a pat so playful, that every one smiles at it, but the victim whose blood she draws."

Alice looked thoughtful. "I don't like her, I repeat, and that perpetual surveillance of hers is fretting to a degree, but I think you exaggerate, Captain Bourke. And after all, let her be malicious as you think her, what possible harm can she do to me—or you?"

"None, perhaps, if you only chose to cut her claws by reassuring me once and for all; but I dread everything so long as we are friends and nothing more. Ah, Miss Dacre, ah Alice, only say there is something more than friendship between us, something warmer on your side, I mean, and—I think I dare defy her and fate and fortune."

As he spoke, his hand closed on that hand of hers it had been hovering over, and fairly secured it. Miss Dacre did not answer his question for the moment, and she turned her head, but if the movement meant coyness, it showed no manner of indignation. Bourke, who had no idea of *s'arrêter dans un si beau chemin*, slipped off the brown gauntlet, pressed the turquoise ring into the white fingers, until their mistress might have exclaimed, had she had thought to spare for

trifles, and raised the hand to his lips. He let it go, to fling his arm with a most natural gesture along the back of the garden seat, and then he let the arm sink as naturally till it found its resting place on Miss Dacre's waist.

He bent his head till the brim of his wideawake touched her garden-hat; he watched for the lifting of the drooping eyelashes that veiled her tell-tale eyes; he lent his lips to the murmur that might come from her parted lips. All he saw and all he guessed relieved his anxiety, and dallying with the pleasures of the moment, he felt he could wait quietly—till the working in Miss Dacre's graceful throat should give passage to the monosyllable he longed for.

Any man would have cursed interruption at such a time, but a harsh rasping footstep, exchanging as his had done the turf for the gravel, fell on his heart like a presentiment. Alice heard it, and would have started from his encircling arm had she not been penned in by the seat. He snatched his arm away; but although trifling voluptuously with his hopes and pleasure, he had shilly-shallied long before giving the assault in form, he had no idea of being driven from the place without formal assurance of his surrender.

"Say 'yes,' Alice for God's sake say 'yes,' if you love me."

"Yes," breathed Alice, looking him in the eyes for a moment, then half turning round, she violently rustled and crumpled the pages of her unlucky book.

"Well, Alice, I've found you at last." And for once her brother's voice sounded unpleasantly to her ear, and she reproached herself bitterly that it should be so.

But it was not altogether fancy when it struck her

there was a hard ring in it, which he had little used her to. He had hurried in quest of her from the house with anything but happy predispositions, and what he saw when he did find her had not tended to his serenity. "Miss Dacre I believe is in the flower-garden, and Captain Bourke as well," the butler had told him very innocently, and here he found Captain Bourke and Miss Dacre *tête-à-tête* in a sequestered nook, and seemingly on such excellent terms as to make the gentleman's confusion, the lady's agitation at being disturbed, the most natural thing in the world.

Ralph made a vigorous effort at self-control, but for the life of him he could not help frowning as he coldly raised his hat to acknowledge Captain Bourke's salutation. A succession of sharp shocks and long wearing anxiety had played the very mischief of late with the calm restraint he used to pride himself on. Captain Bourke looking wretchedness, embarrassment, and anger in about equal proportions, muttered something about "pleasure," raised his hat a second time, and left brother and sister to their embraces.

These passed for once very much as matters of form: there was sensible constraint on either side. Alice had just been drawn over the brink of her maiden life into the flush and promise of a new existence, and had not been spared a second to collect herself. Assuredly she was proud of her lover, but she was blushing yet over the mutual avowal of their love. It was the same feeling that had made her so silent about him in her letters to her brother; that caused her to feel now that she had abused and seemed to distrust her brother's tried affection, and generally treated him abominably. Ralph, on his side, as usual, had come too late; all through life he had been coming late, when coming

sooner might have changed the current of his fortunes. He felt it sharply; he knew he was still in his vein of evil luck, and the knowledge did not help to soothe his ruffled temper. He surmised pretty nearly how the truth was. He knew Alice had not gone out to the garden engaged. She was not the girl to keep an engagement secret, and he had met Mrs. Rufford in the house, and Mrs. Rufford had evidently known nothing. He knew better still that unless Alice had been engaged, or as good as engaged, he would not have found her as he did. So doubting much, sure only that bad for him was the very best, he touched her hot cheek with a chilling kiss, loving her more than ever as he felt he was on the point of losing her and all she represented to him, sullenly angry because she robbed him of so much to lavish it on this stranger he thoroughly detested; whom he detested, because in this ill-timed passion he saw inevitable ruin.

Loving her more than ever, yet she would not have guessed it, and he would hardly have dared to say as much himself. For bitterness and resentment had got the upper hand; he looked at the situation solely from his selfish point of view, and for the moment he honestly believed himself a deeply-injured man. But his ingrained sagacity or craft told him nothing could be more fatal to his influence with Alice than an ill-timed show of temper. Her warm nature had been wax to his so long as he moulded her affections with his; doubtless if this man was her favoured lover, for the moment nature and affections spoke for him. Even Bourke was not lightly to be abused. Ralph knew in his heart that he might be an excellent fellow; possibly, in point of fortune, a suitable match

even for the rich Miss Dacre. Probably that was the idea of the Barham people, or they would not have suffered things to go so far. Certainly Bourke the elder thought so, and until he had thoroughly studied the ugly country that lay before him, Ralph would not risk alienating the queer-tempered old man whose graces he had cultivated so sedulously.

So he pondered, and as they strolled onwards together, plunging into a path that buried itself among the shrubs, he passed his arm where Bourke's had been so lately. The brotherly touch was a bolder one than that of the more timid lover, and yet Alice, grown discriminating in such matters in the last few minutes, felt there was something of constraint in it. He kissed with well-considered warmth the cheek that had changed swiftly from red to pale. He felt it needed a desperate effort to break the silence, but the effort he made; he might have waited long enough before his sister had mustered the courage for it.

"Well, Alice dear, for once in our lives I must say you don't seem overjoyed to see me; and yet——"

"Oh, don't say that, Ralph," piteously remonstrated Alice, stopping short, disengaging herself, and looking pleadingly in his face; then, throwing her arms around him, she hid her face in his shoulder. From that safer vantage ground she could explain matters much more comfortably. "Don't say that, Ralph, for you cannot mean it. But you must have seen or you must guess. Ralph, why can't you help me?" She tapped her little foot half-pettishly on the gravel.

Ralph was touched by the appeal and the caress. How much he would have given at the moment to be the wealthy lord of Heppenstall and Allonby, free to bestow his gracious consent, load his sister with generous

gifts, and consign her with self-denying tenderness to her lover's arm! Actually, he succeeded in feeling he would have been glad this Bourke had been something better than a heartless adventurer, hunting down a confiding girl for her money. As it was, he saw the path of duty lie somewhat crooked before him, and resolved to try and follow it out, although he greatly feared his sister might have barred it already with a frail and fatal "Yes!" If she had had time to raise that little obstacle, he knew it would be well nigh impossible to force it.

"Why, Alice, you forget. If I have seen, or guess, or fancy anything, it has only left me surprised and startled. How can I help you, when everything is mystery to me. I would scarcely believe my senses against your silence. In none of your letters do I remember a single word that would give me the clue to what you seem to hint at; and," he added deliberately, with an artistic touch of melancholy in his tone, "and I could swear my sister Alice would have trusted her brother had she had anything to tell him that concerned her happiness; not left him to learn it by an intrusion and an accident."

He felt remorseful even as he spoke, for she winced, and he knew he was stabbing her. There was one thing to be said for him. At the moment he suffered far more than she; and for himself, he would have been sorely puzzled to tell where he was wounded most, in his affections, fears, or cupidity.

"Oh, Ralph! you can't mean that you don't know—that you can't tell. Really I had nothing to say—nothing I could put on paper. Oh! if you had only come and seen for yourself. You can't think, dear, how I have longed to have you here, and to let you

guess. You know how happy I always was with you, and I had hoped to have been happier now than ever. You know how I have urged your coming in every letter I wrote—in every letter, at least, till the stoppage of that wretched Bank, and then I would have hastened to be with you, if you had not positively forbidden it.”

Then Alice's thoughts took another turn, and in her remorseful self-reproach she actually almost forgot the great matter of the moment. Never dreaming of money straits—knowing herself and her brother wealthy far beyond their possible wants, she had attached slight importance to that Bank failure, and the loss of, perhaps, a few thousands. Now it struck her suddenly that all that might have annoyed her brother more than she supposed, that all the time she had been sunning herself in love and smiles, and cradling herself in golden day-dreams, he might have been bored and bothered with nothing better from her than words of common-place condolence. Thanks to agitation, damp eyes, and abstraction, she had been looking at him without observing. Now she raised her head from the shoulder she had laid it on, placed a hand on each of his shoulders, and held him from her at arm's length. As she gazed, her loving heart was wrung. The ceaseless excitement, the inward turmoil had brought out all the worst signs of the terrible weariness that had been wearying him of late. His pale face had thinned visibly since she had looked on it last, and he had a sadly worn, almost a hopeless look about the eyes. Bourke was out of mind for the moment.

“My dearest, my dearest, how thin and changed you look! You must have been seriously ill, and kept it all from me. Do tell me what has been the matter.”

Even yet she could scarcely couple money troubles with the ravages a few days had made. She would as soon have believed in graving wrinkles on the brow of a marble statue with the point of a steel pen. Ralph had no wish that she should link cause to effect, and guess his riddle. That was his misery, that he was compelled to bear his own burdens, and knew that the sympathy of those who loved him best was unavailable to lighten them by an ounce. He strove to reassure her. He had certainly been ill lately, and so busy he could not afford to lie up. He did not care to trouble her about a trifle that was sure to pass. That, indeed, was why he had written so rarely and so briefly. Unluckily he had gone to bed with a violent headache, had passed a wretched night, and naturally risen looking and feeling wretched.

"Poor fellow!" thought Alice; "no wonder he suffers from my seeming ingratitude, when he came down hoping for comfort. Of course it vexed him to find me forgetting him for a stranger—to find I had given myself to another without telling him a word of it. It will be so very different when he gets to know Philip; but how bad he must think me in the meantime, and it is all my own fault."

And in her penitence, Alice proceeded to work out her atonement in all manner of endearments, putting her brother to sharp torture by the cross-questioning she subjected him to in her anxious affection. Yet he bore his pain like a Spartan, and saying little repaid caress with caress. Nor was there any hypocrisy about that. He knew that with the troubles that came thickening round him, if he did not hold her love by as precarious a tenure as herself, at least it might soon be rudely tested. But it was in sheer self-defence, as well as in a

desperate spirit that was eager to know the worst, that he came ever back to her love affair. As he felt then, he would not for the world have spoken of it to her otherwise than kindly. Yet it was hard, indeed, to make his speech pleasant to her, while he thought so vindictively of her troublesome lover, and was conscious he meant to do his best to mar her happiness,—as she fancied it.

“Enough of me, Alice. I shall be well enough after a day passed with you in the country. But you interrupted your confession in the middle. What was this you did not write me, and that you longed I should come and see for myself?”

Alice looked protest against being forced to explain in words what her brother must know already. But Ralph was obdurate. It was not that he did not feel for her. But he could not for his life bring himself to assume anything of all that was so thoroughly unwelcome to him. He would not help her out with so much as a word, so Alice's feelings began to oscillate back towards her lover now that she was conscious she was being treated unfairly. That slight sense of indignation gave her courage to speak in matter-of-fact fashion.

“I know I ought to have written you, Ralph, and I should have written you, but really I had nothing to tell. Even to a brother such as you I could not run the risk of misinterpreting Captain Bourke's feelings and anticipating their expression. You could not have expected it. People here saw something, I daresay; Edith Rufford did, I know. They all encouraged it, so I was sure you could not disapprove, and—he never spoke till to-day.”

Ralph had muttered a passing curse on those who had approved. It flashed to his mind for the moment

that had he only married Edith when he might, he should now have been approving himself. But when his sister had done speaking he asked eagerly:—
“He has spoken, then; and you, Alice, what did you say?”

Whether she had said anything might make all the difference to him. If she had said yes—he knew her well—she was not likely to draw back except on good cause shown.

“I—I said yes,” whispered Alice. Then looking at him with blushing archness, “And had you come only one minute sooner I should have said nothing. You see you are such a good brother, you can’t help doing kind things in your innocence and ignorance.”

Ralph ground his teeth quietly, and mechanically kissed the lips his sister offered him. He could not possibly fall back on his authority as guardian; his sister was of age, and authority he had none. He could not exert his influence against a man she knew and loved, and of whom he knew nothing; still less could he approve or affect to approve, and so commit himself irretrievably. So he did what was perhaps the best thing he could do from his particular point of view, and said coldly enough:—

“Well, Alice, you will do me the justice to admit I have always made your happiness my first object, and you know there is nothing I can desire for you so much as a happy marriage. But I had hoped I should at least have seen the man to whom the sister I had lived so long with was to give herself.” Alice began to be remorseful again. “One thing I have a right to ask, and I don’t think you will refuse me. Do nothing in a hurry.”

“Dear Ralph,” exclaimed Alice, full of sorrowful

repentance, blind confidence in her brother, and the trusting admiration for her lover which she fancied all the world must share. "Dear Ralph, I am so grieved that I may seem to have acted unkindly towards you, although, indeed, it was only thoughtlessness, and so I am sure will Philip be. And I am so sure you have only to know him to love him too. I give you my word, I shall never marry him till you bid me. There, sir, will that promise content you?"

"I should be unreasonable indeed if it did not. I was very sure you had confidence in me, and it would be hard if you had not, for you are the only thing I love in the world. Well, I have your promise, darling."

Alice formally ratified the bargain with a kiss, and brother and sister strolled affectionately towards the house, although somewhat to Alice's secret mortification Ralph carefully avoided the subject that made her so *distracted*.

Alice did more than make one of those hasty vows that have wrought so much misery since the days of the rash Captain of Gilead. She used her influence with Philip Bourke to keep their engagement a secret for the time, out of consideration for her brother. The influence went a long way, and Philip pledged himself in turn, although with much reluctance. He recompensed himself, it is true, by certain slight caresses she permitted to him as matter of simple justice. He shook his head naturally enough over her hasty promise; but as she explained to him, it had been given voluntarily, not exacted, and that made all the difference. She assured her lover, besides, her brother had only to know him to like him. Philip, although he had a sufficiently good opinion of himself, was by no means so persuaded of that; but he knew that publishing the engagement before

Ralph seemed to authorize it would not be the shortest cut to that gentleman's heart. So, as we said, he assented to all Miss Dacre asked, merely assuring and reassuring himself for his own satisfaction of the validity of the engagement by insisting on setting on her lips numerous fresh seals to the contract.

The mutual embarrassment of Alice and Philip Bourke in their novel and ambiguous relations did not escape the sharp eyes that watched them. Before they had indulged their likings in an easy and natural manner, they had carried on in season and out of season what might have been characterized as a persistent flirtation had it not sprung from feelings too deep to be profaned by a word so trivial. Now they were awkward, and they felt it, and people remarked it, especially Mrs. Rufford, Madame de Chaillot, and keen-eyed old Mr. Bourke. And it was plain the change had something to do with the sudden arrival of the brother.

"What the deuce do you mean, Philip?" old Mr. Bourke could not help saying, bursting through his excellent rule of non-intervention. "What the deuce do you mean? You're another man altogether since Ralph Dacre came. Surely you're not afraid of him?"

Philip, tongue-tied as he was, could give no rational explanation. With his cupidity sharpened by the preciousness of the prize that hung on his having a competency, he could not help feeling the concealment of his relations with his mistress might imperil those ready established with his uncle. Ralph had got his enemy on the hip, and had he but known it, might have consoled himself with the idea that he was causing him many an unhappy hour.

Then there was Edith Rufford, happy with her husband and her children. Convinced long ago that she could never have been happy with Ralph, she had long ago forgiven him. It would have seemed treason to her husband even to think of that passing folly of her youth that had so nearly proved the wretchedness of her life. But now, in spite of herself, interesting herself in Alice's love-making as in a passion of her own, the remembrance of Ralph's behaviour would come back to her. They had been excellent friends for long, she and Ralph; she had come really to like him for the affectionate charge he had taken of his sister, and she appreciated it the more that better than most she had proved his worldly nature. For that very reason she was the more indignant that he should have splashed so awkwardly now into this true-love current that seemed floating Alice so smoothly towards happy matrimony. In vain she did her best. She said, as she had said so often, as she was marshalling her few guests when leaving the drawing-room for dinner, "Captain Bourke, you will take Miss Dacre." Captain Bourke looked at her gratefully, and tendered the young lady his arm. The young lady brightened up, and he waited on her movements with tenderly admiring *empressement* as she settled herself and her diaphanous draperies in her chair. Then Ralph takes his seat opposite, next to Madame de Chaillot, whom the Squire had led in. Then her charges make conversation or sit silent, and she can scarcely conceal her despite when her cousin Ralph addresses himself to her. How to act she knew not. It was a delicate business to interfere in. Alice had given her no right to speak, and it might make mischief even trying to draw the confidence of Alice. She consulted her husband, and he made light of it.

"It's all very natural, my dear, depend upon it. Bourke doesn't know Ralph Dacre the least, and it makes it awkward for him. Just wait a bit, and take patience, and let matters shake down. He's as sweet on Alice as ever, and she on him, and they're not so old but what they can afford to waste a day or two. Besides, when it is settled you can fix the marriage the sooner and make it up to her that way."

Mrs. Rufford was silenced if not satisfied, but her impatience grew upon her, and Bourke the senior was even more impatient than she. The situation threatened to grow very tense. With his susceptibilities excited to the utmost, reading the thoughts of others by nervous intuition; his heated imagination supplying the blanks in the sense the most disagreeable for himself, Ralph was more conscious of its awkwardness than any of them. With a lingering respect for Edith Rufford that dominated him even in his extremity; with a consideration for the rich old Mr. Bourke that made him extremely sensitive to his view of the matter; with a concern for his sister that caused him exceeding pain in seeing her suffer—suffer she did—Ralph felt things could not go on as they were. Flight or action, that was the dilemma before him, and the one resource seemed nearly as unpromising as the other. The victim of circumstances of his own creation, he had well nigh abdicated all free will, and while he yet vibrated between doubt and despair, accident or design sent him a counsellor.

CHAPTER XII.

*RALPH GOES ABROAD WITH ALICE'S
HAPPINESS.*

DURING the two or three days Ralph passed at Barham—days into which so many of the members of the little party assembled crowded so much of interest, anxiety, or positive suffering—he had been drawn a good deal towards Madame de Chaillot. A cloud had settled down between him and his sister, thin enough, indeed, to outward seeming, but chilling them sensibly when they approached each other in the old fashion. Edith Rufford, in resenting the effect of his descent upon her cherished schemes for her favourite, had revived the memories of griefs well-nigh forgotten; and Ralph knew she regarded him by the light of the old occurrences that made his remorse. Whith none of the others had he much sympathy, at the best of times; and he felt that lavishing blandishments on his ancient ally, Bourke, was likely just then to be more perilous than profitable. And Julia, too, was in a manner estranged in the family ark, in which all the rest of them floated on such excellent terms; so, with studied unobtrusiveness, she invited Ralph to a seat in the boat she was pulling on her own account. Adventurer and adventuress, their minds fitted in a manner, and they had the comfort of understanding each other without being always at the trouble to speak out. Before two days were over, they were on almost as easy terms as they had been a dozen years before at Haughton Towers, when Ralph was launching himself in English society; more than that,

there was the same dash of love-making about their conferences—a highly polished imitation of what might once have turned to real feeling. Ralph showed more of his mind, and confessed more of his circumstances to Julia de Chaillot than to any one else. He still, it is true, kept up the pretension of being a man of ample means, and, so far as she was concerned, with some success; but he accounted for being bored and anxious, by the admission that this awkward bank failure had subjected him to temporary pressure; while, with regard to his sister and Philip Bourke, the confidential communication that had passed between himself and Madame de Chaillot placed the pair, to a certain extent, on velvet.

She and he were seated in the drawing-room one evening, continuing the engrossing conversation they had commenced during dinner. Mrs. Rufford rose from the piano, to push Alice down on her music-stool. Alice's gold bracelet fell with a rattle on the carpet—a rattle sufficient to make both Ralph and Julia turn their heads. Philip Bourke, who had been turning Mrs. Rufford's music, and feasting his eyes on Alice's face, stooped eagerly to pick the bracelet up. Trusting, perhaps, that the male and the female Argus, whom he dreaded, were still seated as they had been, he could not resist the occasion to press his lady love's fingers, as he clasped the armlet on; and, unrestrained by the presence of her friend Edith, she could not deny him a smile in acknowledgment of the caressing movement with which he drew his fingers over hers. Julia and Ralph's eyes met. His brow was as black as thunder-clouds, and he winced, as if his sister's smile had stung him. There was a bitterness in Julia's low, half-inquiring laugh that surprised him, and made him look

at her hard. Ralph "knew himself" in the worse springs of our fallen nature, and the laugh came to his sympathetic nature like a revelation. "Jealousy," he said to himself at once; and he felt it might be pleasant, and ought to be safe, to have it out with her; nor did she, on her side, hesitate to give him the opportunity.

"You see, Mr. Dacre, you were quite right in your apprehensions. For your sake, as you said nothing about Captain Bourke or your sister, I had hoped you had discovered you were wrong."

"If I said nothing, it was only because I knew no right I had to trouble you." Ralph hesitated a moment, whether he should tell his companion all or not; then he decided he would, in the certainty that she could help him; yet, as he looked at Alice, he had a pang. He was enlisting against the sister he loved so dearly an intriguing woman of the world, who regarded her with something less than friendly feelings. It is for her own good, he told himself; and, after all, I am there to save her from anything like malice; and he went on hurriedly, and told all, or nearly all.

Madame de Chaillot's face expressed little surprise as she listened to the story, but it brightened somewhat as she heard of Alice's warm-hearted vow. The tale told, she said something affectionately flattering to Alice, who had just finished her piece, and went on talking.

"One thing is clear, Mr. Dacre. You must leave Barham at once; and it is very disinterested my saying so, for now that my uncle is gone, you are the only soul in the house whose conversation does not bore me to death. I own it frankly."

"You think so?"

Ralph's question applied to the former, not the latter part of her speech; and so she took it.

"I am sure of it. You have your sister's word; and dear Alice will keep it, I am certain, till you release her."

Ralph nodded, and felt a passing spasm wring his heart.

"Very well. For the sake of her own future happiness, dear girl, you must not think of releasing her; you must do your best to delay the marriage. But all the people here are on her side, or, rather, on his. Captain Bourke has cast his glamour over them all, it seems to me. Besides, if you remain, his uncle, who is getting terribly impatient, and would give everything he has in the world to make a niece of Alice, will insist upon an explanation. Then you have to yield or quarrel with him; and that, perhaps, you would not care to do." Julia looked sharply at Ralph, and went on: "Moreover, if you stay in the house, and don't give your assent to her praying looks, if not to her pleading language, your sister will come to regard you as her *bourreau*, and that you would like still less. I know it must be painful to you, the paining her; but you must see yourself she will suffer far less if you go, and—so—think of her future happiness."

Ralph scarcely dared to think of it, but he tried to persuade himself he should do the best he could for Alice, by following Julia's counsel; he was certain he would to the best for himself. Then he thought of one thing that did not seem to have occurred to Julia. If he left Barham, and left things as they were, old Mr. Bourke's impatience would have its natural result, and he would quarrel with his nephew, not with him.

"I believe you are right, Madame de Chaillot."

"I am quite sure I am. Take my advice, Mr. Dacre, and have a telegraphic message from London to-morrow: no need for leave-takings, if you intend to return immediately. Then, in London, you can find pressing business to call you to Heppenstall. Really, I need not trouble myself to find excuses for you. I can't imagine any one who can do it better for himself," she added, politely.

Ralph winced, and looked at her; but Julia seemed quite unconscious.

"The excuse is ready to my hand, and your idea jumped with the plans I made before circumstances turned out as they have done. Indeed Hardcastle, a friend of mine, had made me promise to start with him immediately for Germany, although, after what I learned here, I said nothing of it to Alice, or any one."

"Excellent! Only, if I may be indiscreet enough to push my *rôle* of counsellor to indelicate interference, you had better say nothing of that now. Bind Mr. Hardcastle over to silence, and let dear Alice believe you started on the spur of the moment. You should know her best, but she might not very easily forgive you otherwise."

Could Ralph have believed, some months back, that he would be actually conspiring with a comparative stranger to deceive his sister? One thing he was sure of: Hardcastle would, knowingly, bear no share in the plot; but then Hardcastle was no great letter-writer, and by the time they should return to England, nothing was more unlikely than that Alice and he should compare notes on all this. So Ralph thanked the fair Achitophel for the excellence of the counsels he promised to follow. The advice was good, but rather revolting; and it was with a mixture of admiration and dislike he

pressed her hand gallantly as he handed her into her carriage at the door, remembering all through the pressure the jealousy to which he owed the alliance. Madame de Chaillot, a thorough woman of the world, merely received the homage with a word or two of badinage that might mean anything or nothing; and Ralph, pretending a headache, declined an adjournment to the smoking-room with Rufford and Captain Bourke, and retired early, to keep a late vigil and pass a sleepless night.

Next morning, having carefully studied the timetable, and decided upon a train that suited him, he asked the squire, as they were all drawing back their chairs from the breakfast table.

"Can you spare me something, sir, to take me over to the 11.15 train? Unfortunately, I find by my letters I must absolutely be in town to-day."

"Why, God bless me, Ralph, I reckoned on having you with us for another week, at least. I hadn't the assurance to count on a longer visit than that."

"And so you may have me for a week, sir, if you don't dread being saddled with me so long," rejoined Ralph, blushing slightly, for his sister had been looking at him anxiously, and showed herself intensely relieved as he spoke. Perhaps the brooding of her mind predisposed her to presentiments; perhaps she did not like to let out of her sight the man she had entrusted with the happiness of him she loved more dearly than herself. At all events, Ralph felt as if he was perpetrating a foul crime, under cover of thick darkness, as he added, "I must be in town, sir; there is no help for it; and, as I shall want some papers I have with me, I may as well take my portmanteau. But I shan't spend more than a couple of nights there, or three at

furthest, and then you shall have me again, if you will."

By this time both Alice and Philip Bourke had cheered up. It struck them both that Ralph's readiness to return was the surest sign of his willingness to crown their happiness. Alice passed her arm through her brother's as they rose, and dragged him away into the embrasure of a window. Then arranging him dexterously behind a curtain, she pressed her lips first on his forehead, then to his lips. So far as she was concerned, no cloud hung between them then. Yet against him, it lay chiller and heavier than ever.

"What a dear, kind brother you are, Ralph, coming back to us so soon. It is so good of you after my thoughtlessness, but I have been very penitent, and Philip will be very grateful."

Ralph kissed his sister violently by way of the reply that might have embarrassed him had it been couched in words. And yet there was little hypocrisy in the warmth of the kisses, for he felt himself on the brink of breaking with the past that had given him the purest happiness he had enjoyed; that in all human probability Alice and he might never meet again on that old loving footing. Next time it might be hers to pardon the brother she had learned to depise, if not to hate. And this accursed Bourke was the cause of all. Less than ever at that moment, could he have borne to make his sister happy in the way she wished. With a marvellous effort of composure he kissed her again, fondly and more quietly, and walked off to superintend his final preparations.

Mr. Roper followed him into the waggonette, having previously deposited his master's portmanteau and writing-case there. And Mr. Roper had had time to

mention in the servant's hall, of which he was an ornament, that he knew his master was off to Germany, that he had heard him talk it over with Mr. Hardcastle before they came down, which remark was mentioned to Miss Dacre by Miss Dacre's maid, in the course of incidental conversation over the hair-brushing, and dismissed by Miss Dacre as erroneous on the face of it, her brother himself having told her otherwise. But when she happened to notice it to Philip among the first flush of little confidences that followed the removal of the restraint upon them, that gentleman made it matter for serious reflection. So much so, that although it was a subject on which he could say nothing to his mistress, he would have thought it quite worth while taking the opinion of his uncle, had he only been in a position to tell the old gentleman all.

CHAPTER XIII.

RALPH FANCIES HE FINDS REDEMPTION.

HARDCASTLE found Ralph by no means a very lively travelling companion on their journey to Baden. The Dacre of the ride to Halliford had vanished, and the careworn man he had unearthed in Berkeley Square had come back again. Only twice did Ralph brighten up and talk naturally. Once as they paced the packet deck in the night-crossing of the channel, as the vessel danced over the green swell, and the spray-laden breeze whistled among the shrouds, and the stays of the funnel. And again when a coupling broke as the Strasbourg express was slacking off speed on the approach to

Epernay, and their carriage went jumping madly on the rails, it being a chance indeed whether life or death might win the toss for them. The truth was, in phantom form Alice had joined herself to the party, and invisible to her sworn admirer Hardcastle, was always present to her brother's eyes. On the features that used always to beam at his approach, he saw the sad expression that came of disappointment and wearing suspense. It showed how regretful he was of the misery he caused his sister, that Asgill and Gaboche and the hungry liquidators of the broken bank only fell into her train. But altogether his phantom society was disagreeable as well might be, and made him cling more desperately than ever to the vague hope, that he might find some golden charm against their haunting horrors in his picturesque domains of the Schwarzwald.

Heppenstall looked much as it used to look: although as they took old Müller by surprise, there was a rank growth of weeds on the gravel and terraced garden. The superintendent was certainly careful as might be, and though it pained him to move about among the departed glories of the place he loved so well, yet he did his duty staunchly by his master and economized labour to the utmost. This time Ralph had determined not to put up at the Castle, but to patronize the ancient village hostelry of the "Black Ox." His visit was to be a flying one: the elderly female in charge at the Schloss would scarcely have supplied unassisted, the wants of the two, veteran campaigners as they were; perhaps, although he did not own it to himself, he shrank in the circumstances from occupying the rooms refitted by his sisters's wish, and where they had passed together so many happy hours.

So they had descended at the "Ox," to the mingled

consternation and delight of the host, who worked himself into a white heat in his violent efforts to do honour to his distinguished visitors.

"Herr Müller is not aware of the gracious Baron's intention or arrival," queried the open-eyed host, rubbing his fat hands and bowing himself backward before the arrivals.

"No, we came unexpectedly, and as I had resolved on taxing your hospitality, I thought it hardly worth while to write."

"The gracious Baron does me infinite honour: shall I send to warn Herr Müller, although I believe it is unnecessary, for by this time the entire village rejoices at the happy event."

"I dare say it is quite unnecessary. At any rate we mean to stroll up to the Schloss, while you get us something for a supper: don't trouble yourself to-night—trout, veal-cutlets, salad, sweet-omelette, and a flask or two of the Heppenstaller—what you always have ready. We shall be back by eight, and I shall go round by Herr Müller's house and beg him to join us."

Then the gentlemen having walked round by the bailiff's; having found him from home, and left a hospitable message against his return, had walked on to the Castle and made their observations as to the gain of the jungle on ancient cultivation.

Ralph shrugged his shoulders. "Nothing very homelike, Hardcastle, turn which way I will. When I remember how bright the terrace was in the old times, and the life and bustle there used to be in the old house. My grandfather was hasty with me, but I don't blame the old man half so much as myself, and if he can see his stamm-schloss as it is now, God knows, he must find himself in a protestant purgatory."

He uttered the last words aloud, yet to himself far more than to Hardcastle. It was strange how his character had changed, so far as Hardcastle was concerned, at least since he had made him that first half-confidence. With him he was no longer the reserved man who kept his secrets locked close in his breast, jealously guarding the key. Now, the temptation once yielded to, of indulging in a slight abandon, seemed occasionally too strong for him to resist. He knew well he could count on Hardcastle's discretion so long as he kept his confidences within certain bounds.

"Bah, Ralph," exclaimed Hardcastle cheerily. "Shake off your blue devils for a bit and don't bother with the past, when you want all your pluck to cope with the present. Heppenstall does not look very homelike at present, it's true, but, remember, we've come here to try and find you a way out of the wood; and find it, I really believe we shall. Then you can follow the path to a quiet home if you please; or if it suit you better, run loose abroad with an easy conscience. Meantime let us put off moralizing for another day, and find our way down to the 'Ox's' supper. I, for one, am confoundedly hungry, and I hope the landlord won't take you at your word, and ration us on stringy veal-cutlets. You were as civil to the man, as if he pulled the strings of the rickety old Borough of yours, and you meant to stand for it."

"You may laugh at me, Hardcastle, but I always feel kindly to these Heppenstall folks. I've passed many a happy day here in my life, I might have had many more, and now—it needs small belief in presentiments to make me fancy I shall never pay the old place another visit."

"Come on, come on to supper, my dear fellow.

You're absolutely incorrigible to-night. I must hand you over to the Heppenstaller and Herr Müller's society, and see what they can do to brighten you up."

The supper was more than Ralph had asked, or Hardcastle hoped for: the Heppenstaller from the vintage bin laughed into the high-stemmed ruby glasses and played its merry part, but Herr Müller, although he duly appeared, and welcomed his master with obsequious friendship, did not show as if he were likely to contribute to the evening's hilarity. On the contrary, he looked so hipped and abstracted that Ralph at once presaged some new misfortune. So much so, that he dared to ask nothing while the landlord was still labouring out and in, while the waiting-maid was yet panting about the apartment. But when the fruits and glasses were on the table, and the three were left to themselves, he turned to the land-steward.

"Why, Müller, what ever is the matter with you? Speak out, man, and for God's sake let's have the worst at once."

The stolid Müller looked somewhat surprised, startled and scandalized at this unwonted outbreak on the part of his rather saturnine master. Hardcastle made more allowance for the irritated state of the other's nerves: he began to realize how very much his companion must have suffered lately, and to draw conclusions anything but tranquillizing. As for Müller, he seemed as if he would have much rather prevaricated if he could, had he not been overborne by the other's impatient manner. However, Ralph never took his eagerly anxious eyes off the blue spectacles. Clearly, there was no help for it.

"You will laugh at me, I know, gracious sir, and you will have right, but—" Müller stopped.

"Laugh at you! heaven knows, if I chime in with your desponding humour, I'm much more likely to weep or howl; well, then?"

"Well, then," burst out Müller, desperately, "it is just this, Herr Baron, that I have lost an old friend—an old friend of mine, and an old *protégé* of yours. Poor Freiherr died to-day!" and the worthy Müller took off his spectacles and wiped them. "You remember Freiherr, surely," he proceeded. "Freiherr you picked up in the kitchens of the Schloss that night you arrived from Italy? From that day you brought him here to this, Freiherr has never left me; and pardon me, Herr Baron, but the house seemed so strange without him this afternoon, that I had no heart to stay in it. That was how you found me away from home at the supper hour."

Hardcastle might possibly have laughed at another time; for although there was a heart in his bosom for the few who could find their way to it, yet it had little delicacy of fibre; and this spectacled old German pulling long faces over the departure of a cross-bred cur, was a sight as likely to excite his mirth as his pity. But he was looking in puzzled gravity—on the deeper gloom that had settled down in Dacre's face. That this queer-looking old gentleman should grieve over his dead dog like a child over a canary—good. He knew nothing of the grain of the wood under the wrinkled bark; and for all he knew, Müller's nature might be soft as the plank you can leave the mark of your knuckles in. But Ralph Dacre—him he had known and studied for long, and he would have given him credit for being built more of the teak than the cotton wood. Yet there he sat, looking gloomier than Müller, over this blessed brute of a foundling he had handed the other

to dry-nurse. The man puzzled him more and more. Surely he and his affairs must be in a desperate way, indeed, and the most rational explanation he could suggest to himself, was that trouble or conscience must have touched his brain.

Perhaps one or the other had, although not precisely as Hardcastle fancied. But the truth is, Ralph for the time being was the sport of the blackest fancies, the willing victim of sinister presentiments. The saving poor Freiherr had been one of the few disinterestedly kind actions he could look back upon, and it seemed trebly ominous in his frame of mind, that just when he came to seek his desperate chances of safety at Heppenstall he should be greeted with the news of the dog's demise. One of the rare ties snapped that bound him to anything he could look on with satisfaction—a something blotted from his meagre list of good works. What kindly things had he ever done besides? He had helped Hardcastle to his Queen's messengership, and Hardcastle would probably throw him over next—perhaps betray him. No, as for betrayal, there he thought he might trust him; yet there was no telling. So even in repentance and remorse, Ralph's engrained selfishness struggled for the upper hand and pretty well succeeded in keeping it.

But charity often has its reward even in this life, and a good action is apt to bear its fruit. Poor Freiherr breathed blessings on his earliest benefactor from the fresh made grave under the old lilac-tree in Müller's garden. For Müller finding unexpected sympathy in the quarter where he had dreaded ridicule, felt more gratefully and warmly to his master than he had ever done, and these feelings influenced his sense of duty through his softened heart, in the momentous interview that ensued.

Ralph smarting with a sense of shame under the curious observation of his two companions, changed the subject quickly to the important object that had sent him travelling to Baden.

"Well, Müller, how are things going here; have you any good news for me?"

Müller shook his head. "Nothing you will like to hear, gracious sir, I greatly fear. Money was never so bad to come by, I think, and it is all we can do to meet the interest on the mortgages. I have been saving all I could, as you must have seen. And it is come to that, that I have not even had the Schloss garden-terraces weeded."

Ralph nodded impatiently.

"We have had a bad year, worse indeed, than I cared to write you. No rain all through March; and the meadows in the Lauffenthal let wretchedly in April. Wicker-work has gone out of fashion, I think, judging by the prices they offered for the osier-beds by the river. It was a wretched season for the vintage this last; blight and flea on the hops; and the people were backward with the rents; and this next autumn, from what I can learn, we are likely to give away the thinnings of the timber.

Ralph could not repress a moment of impatience.

"A bad time to cut wood, then, if I thought of doing it?"

"No use whatever, sir. It would be sheer wilful waste. Gröben brought down some of the firs in these woods he bought by Rippoldsheim, and there the trees are lying and rotting. He couldn't get his money, and he says he won't give them away. By the way, that reminds me, gracious sir, God forgive me! but poor Freiherr's put it clean out of my head.

I hear from Gröben this morning, giving notice about paying up a half a million of the florins on mortgage."

"You can replace them, I suppose?"

"Only at an advance of a half per cent., I fear greatly, and that Gröben well knows."

"Good heavens!" said Ralph, making a rapid calculation. "That would be some 2,500 florins a year extra, over 200*l.*, besides the cost of renewing. I suppose Gröben wants me to sell, and is willing to give as good a price as he offered before? Well, curse him, he has beaten me; and sell I will. I can't afford to continue the fight. No use persevering, Eh, Hardcastle?"

He looked over at Hardcastle, and his face was livid. His eyes shone with unnatural light; and that last announcement of Müller had traced broad black circles beneath them. Hardcastle understood him, and felt for him. He knew the unconscious bailiff had dashed away the cup of hope he had been persuading his reluctant friend to raise to his lips—had spilled the illusive contents, and filled it fresh to the brim again with despair and bitterness.

Müller did not understand him at all. He knew his employer had neglected Heppenstall much, or, at least, insisted on its being self-supporting. But he knew him rich, too, and he could not conceive a few thousand florins up or down should make such an impression on that calm reserved man, on the wealthy English proprietor. Why should such a trifling loss move him to so grave a decision as the parting with the hereditary property he had clung to for so many years? His talking of it must have been a mere outbreak of petulance; and yet his looks indicated something very different

from a passing burst of temper. No; he could not tell what to make of it.

Ralph soon helped him to make up his mind. "Sell Heppenstall!" Müller had ejaculated. "Yes, sell Heppenstall!" returned Ralph. "I'll have no more of it. I fancy if I sell, I can pay off all incumbrances, and have something handsome left, especially if you manage Gröben judiciously. Eh, Müller?"

"Yes, yes, certainly. But pardon me, Herr Dacre, this is a serious step, and you will bear with me for a single moment. Were you a poor man, I could understand it: but rich as you are, why not arrange to clear the heavy part of the encumbrances yourself? that, as you know, is what I have always advised. And the gracious Fräulein Alice, she loves Heppenstall so much; she has often told me so; and she, too, has money, and plenty of it, and might clear away all Gröben's claims."

Müller pled, and yet it struck the observant Hardcastle, and Ralph as well, preoccupied as he was, that he pled rather as one who discharges a duty half-devotedly, than with the zeal of the old retainer who sees the property he has lived on all his life, passing from the family under whom he and his have lived for generations.

"The rascal plays double, as I thought, and has most likely been squared by this Gröben," was the idea of Hardcastle, and some such notion may have flitted simultaneously across Dacre's brain. At any rate, the allusion to the gracious Fräulein stung him to irritation, as it always did now-a-days. He answered sharply, and with a small regard to the superintendent's display of feeling.

"I shall sell Heppenstall, and the only thing that

remains, is to settle the when and the how. Yes, I'll have done with it, once and for all. Heppenstall shall be sold, as sure as I look you in the face, Herr Müller."

"And that is your irrevocable determination, Herr Baron? Your last word? You pledge me your solemn word of honour you mean what you say?"

Ralph looked at him surprised. "I pledge you my solemn word of honour," he said slowly, after a pause.

"Will you humour an old man's fancy, the fancy of a man who has lived in the place since a child, and managed it till he came to believe it half his own? Will you humour my fancy? Will you write me a line to say this, and sign it?"

This time Müller was evidently earnest enough. Ralph looked at him distrustfully, and was about to refuse harshly, when suddenly he reconsidered his intention. He may be honest, after all; and what does it matter if he be not?" he muttered. "Give me pen and paper then, Müller," he said aloud.

Müller jumped up, handed him the materials he asked for, and watched him eagerly as he wrote. Ralph scribbled a line or two, threw them across to Müller, who read them, then folded up the paper, and deposited it carefully in his pocket-book.

"I hold your formal promise to sell Heppenstall, Herr Baron?"

"Pshaw!" ejaculated Ralph, impatiently. He began to think the old man was presuming on the good nature he had tested so hard under most trying circumstances: was diverting himself with a little private farce of his own, while his unlucky master was agonizing towards the close of a horrible drama.

"I have your formal promise to sell Heppenstall. Well, Herr Baron, I release you from it. My word for it—the word of an honest man who knows what he is talking of, and whose heart has been too heavy for him to jest now—my word for it, you do not part with Heppenstall this time."

Müller's face beamed all over as he spoke. He looked like a man who has cast off a crushing burden, as he straightened his stooping shoulders, and pressed home the blue spectacles on his nose with an action eloquent of renewed vigour.

Dacre regarded him, as a man might the careworn cat who assumes the playfulness of the kitten. It struck him the superintendent's fooling was in execrable taste, if not sheer insanity; and, had the taste been better, he was not disposed to tolerate it. He drew himself up in turn, with all the dignity of all the Heppenstalls.

"You forget yourself strangely, Herr Müller; this decision is no light one for me, lightly as you seem to regard it."

"Regard it lightly! Ah, mein Gott, Herr Freiherr, it is because I know all it must have cost you, that I dare to sport with you now. Who could feel more profoundly than me the bitterness of parting from Heppenstall; for, if you had cast loose from it, I must have gone. Of the less consequence, that I should never have survived seeing Herr Gröben, of Basle, under the roof of the Barons of Heppenstall;" and, indeed, at the very thought the tears stood in old Müller's eyes.

"Then, may I ask, what the devil you do mean, Müller?" queried Ralph, mollified, excited, impatient, and hopelessly puzzled. "To the point, man—to the point!"

"Then, in brief, Herr Baron, know that I hold in trust for you the vouchers for all the sums your grandfather advanced to the Grand Duke. The acknowledgments are formally subscribed by his highness in person. The treasury will recognize their validity, and, doubtless, arrange for prompt settlement; in any case, they become negotiable forthwith. Oh, we shall clear the property, and Gröben shall have his money far sooner than he desired it."

Ralph was wonderstruck, and sat speechless. He felt like a man half-waking from some happy dream he dreads to dissipate.

Hardcastle, perfectly collected because less directly interested, and seeing his way to a solution of the doubts that had long beset him, took the word for his friend.

"A strange story, truly, this of yours, Herr Müller; no wonder it has struck Mr. Dacre dumb. Permit me to interpret his thoughts, and ask a plain answer to a plain question. How the fiend does it happen that you, his trusted agent, should have dared to keep such a secret from him—a secret, the keeping of which may have wrought more misery than you dream of." And, as Hardcastle spoke, his gray eyes flamed up, and he dragged at his long moustache in a way that might have startled a less nervous man than old Müller. He was thinking of Ralph and Alice: of trouble wrought, that might be repented of indeed, and atoned in a sense, but yet in a way had passed into the realms of the irretrievable.

Müller, thoroughly frightened, and not altogether following the indifferent German in which Hardcastle couched his meaning, lost his head; he stammered and he stuttered, made himself utterly unintelligible, and looked hopelessly guilty.

Then Ralph came to the rescue, and with a mighty effort on himself, thought almost calmly, and spoke almost softly. A gleam of hope was brightening in on his despair, and soothing him amid all his agitation.

“Take time, Müller, and tell us the truth quietly. Remember how anxious I must be to hear it; and if you have been the innocent instrument of annoying me, make reparation by relieving my suspense. There is a mystery clearly; yet I feel sure, as I am sitting here that you have been the victim of circumstances, like myself.”

“You are right, noble sir; there is a mystery; and often have I been on the brink of betraying it, and woeful trouble the preserving it has caused me. But it was the last wish of your lamented grandfather. I never disobeyed him living, and I was not likely to disobey him dead.”

Ralph's hopes burned up. He began to see his way to possibilities, through what had seemed at first the strangely impossible; and then, and bit by bit, Müller told his story. We need not repeat at length the prolix disclosures elicited under examination, cross-examination, and re-examination. Loyalty and the longing for vengeance had brought the old baron to his prince's help at a very critical juncture. Hot resentment had burned in his breast at the ingratitude and apparent disloyalty of his self-willed grandson; but, although he resolved to inflict on the young man something of the chastisement his offences merited, he had no idea of sacrificing absolutely the son of his only daughter, and the old domains of the long-descended Heppenstalls to boot. So, in assisting his sovereign, who was his friend as well, he had imparted

his intentions, and persuaded him to forward them. The Grand Duke willingly granted an acknowledgment, under his own sign manual, for all the sums lent by the Baron—an excellent bargain, in any case—sums bearing no interest, but repayable on demand. The loss of interest for a certain number of years, the annoyance at being practically disinherited, was the punishment the Baron chose to inflict on Ralph. But he knew him, as he fancied, heir to a good English property; for the Baron had no conception of the grave embarrassment of Sir Wyndham; and, consequently, no suspicion of the straits his grandson would be driven to. So, he simply stipulated that the existence of the vouchers for these loans should be kept a secret, until twenty years should have elapsed from his death, if his grandson should survive him so long. Then Müller, alarmed for the family property he cherished so dearly, had suggested that Ralph, in his disgust at finding it so grievously encumbered, might not improbably be tempted to get rid of it. Shrinking from such a catastrophe the Baron had been persuaded to add, that that contingency should justify the guardians of the securities in producing them. Herr von Propfenzieher had been no party to the arrangement. It is true, he had excellent reasons for surmising that vouchers of the debt might possibly exist; but he was devoted to the interests of an encumbered treasury, and had no idea of multiplying his financial difficulties by needless officiousness. The Grand Duke might have regretted his pledge to keep the secret, had he known how heavily his and his minister's character had suffered in his subject's fancy. The only other individual privy to it, besides Müller, was the old family banker of the Von Heppenstalls, at Carlsruhe. He had assisted with Müller at

sealing up the packet which contained the vouchers of the debt, as well as the Baron's last instructions regarding them. He had afterwards become its depositary, and, when he had died years before, it had remained in the strong-room of his establishment. It was he, and a gentleman of the bedchamber still living, who had witnessed the Grand Duke's signature—the gentleman of the bedchamber knowing nothing of the contents of the deed he set his hand to.

The short of it was, that all had been duly done; the documents were formal, and Ralph, when he pleased, might claim the sums contained in them. Farther, although for that he cared comparatively little, there was the Grand Duke's formal promise in writing to confirm the title on the Baron's descendants by the female line, in consideration of the affection he bore his loving and loyal cousin.

How Ralph got to bed that night he hardly knew. The blessed news at once intoxicated and stupefied him, as if he had been inhaling the vapours from a bubbling cauldron of opium-drugged brandy. Even Müller, who liked money as well as most men, and more than any man appreciated the charms of the title and estates of Heppenstall, was slightly scandalized in his inmost heart at the stunning effects of the pleasant shock on his employer. Hardcastle, on the other hand, who, in different circumstances, would have been a far harsher judge, was neither scandalized nor surprised. He could form a pretty clear conception of all that the possession of some 90,000*l.* meant to Ralph Dacre at that moment. "Let bygones be bygones now," was what he said to himself. "All's well that ends well; and God knows, this turn of luck must have come to Ralph just as he needed it most desperately."

Ralph did fall asleep at last, slept heavily and woke late. A light breeze was playing among the trees, and the vine-tendrils and the sprays of the monthly roses were rustling drowsily against the old lozenged window-panes of the "Black Ox." One of the casements stood open, and through it came the heavy hum of bees, the full fragrance of old-fashioned flowers: the shadows of the sycamore branches as they danced in the sunlight over the grass beneath. There was the faint murmur of the little rill that ran by the bottom of the garden, the twitter of the sparrows and the songless song-birds, the swelling coo of the ringdove from the beech-wood that came feathering up to the skirts of the village. The air was full of lightness and freshness, life and hope. Ralph felt the uncongenial influences, sighed, turned from the light, and buried his head despondingly on his pillow, as if he would bully retiring sleep into lending him a few more minutes of oblivion. Those moments of morning misery had become so utterly a matter of custom with him. Then of a sudden, as kindly sleep refused to yield to violence, he recollected himself, rubbed his eyes and wakened up to the glad reality. He bounded from the bed on to the polished planks, thrust the rickety toilette table aside, and pitched his head and shoulders out at the little casement. How he opened his lungs to draw down huge draughts of the gladness that was all about him. How he feasted his opened eyes on the glad freshness of the forest foliage, as once again in his life, he felt himself a boy. What to him now, that embarrassments might swallow the lion's share of the unlooked-for windfall, and leave him possibly even poorer than he had once been. He had learned his lesson at last, sad and suicidal experiences had taught him there might be far worse evils than

poverty. He had been taught the agony of struggling to assert a false position, bayed in and beset by open-mouthed temptations. He was in love and charity with all the world. He was his own master again, free, if he choose, to leave with light conscience the world he was sick of, and the cloud was lifted from between him and his sister. These matters here put in train, he would hasten home to Alice and help her to be happy in her own way. If Bourke had fairly won her, why he must have her, he supposed. Even Bourke did not seem such a very bad fellow that merry morning.

"Ha, Ralph, up at last," shouted Hardcastle's cheerful voice from under the window; I borrowed from the landlord what they call a rod and tackle in these parts, and have been whipping the Katzbach for a couple of hours. Not a fin would look up, and I suppose it's no use saying there must be thunder in the air or that it's going to rain; so it must have been the tackle. However, I have caught the appetite I went to fish for, and as breakfast will be served in a quarter of an hour sharp, you must pay the penalty of your laziness, and trifle with the dishes while I devour them."

Ralph nodded good-humouredly, and said something carelessly; proceeded to his toilette, actually caught himself whistling, and descended in about twenty minutes to find Hardcastle seated at the table, spread under the trellice-work, in the garden beneath the windows. The sun had been impressed to act as refrigerator, and more than one long-necked bottle swathed in damp cloths, stood sweltering in his rays: cray-fish, sliced sausage, cool butter, crisp radishes and other *hors-d'œuvres* heralded a banquet that should do honour to the hostelry.

Ralph emerged from the door, and came along the

walk, his face glistening with cheerful health, rubbing his hands as he walked, with the air of a man who is at peace with himself, and has a fountain of content welling up within him. He looked a round dozen of years younger than when he arrived at Heppenstall the night before.

"You don't give a fellow much law, Martin, I must say," he began good-humouredly. It was rarely indeed he called his companion by his Christian name: Hardcastle knew it for a sign of buoyant spirits; it associated itself with one of their long, excited chats on adventure that drew towards the small hours. "You don't give a fellow much law, I must say. Last night you said nothing of so early a breakfast."

"Last night we utterly forgot to make our arrangements. But, of course, I knew what you would want to do, and when I got up early this morning, did all that was needful. I timed myself to come back from fishing, and should have wakened you, had I not found you up. But here come the trout: of the less consequence my not catching any, and, indeed, old Holzapfel assured me beforehand, he would cook nothing that had not been fed in his tank in the brook there. But get to work, Ralph, get to work. The carriage will be at the door in something less than an hour; scant enough time too for breakfast, coffee, cigars and digestion."

"The carriage? What carriage? What do you mean Hardcastle?"

"Yes; the carriage undoubtedly. You intend to go to Carlsruhe at once, I presume, to satisfy your mind offhand; procure those precious documents, and present them for recognition."

"Gad, Hardcastle, I had no time to think of that as yet."

"Of course not. But you would have thought of it a little later, and accordingly I anticipated you. We shall hit off the 12.20 train at the station. Müller comes of course. I asked him to breakfast, but he said he had some things to knock off before he started. The old gentleman was never set a trundling on such short notice I'll swear, unless when your friends the insurgents of '49 smoked your grandfather out of the Schloss. Pardon me; I forgot; it's a sore subject, although not so much so as this time yesterday. Here—*Kellnerin—Katharine—noch eine flasche Heppenstaller.*

More than punctual, Herr Müller turned up attired from head to heel, notwithstanding the heat of the sun and the awful dust of the road, in frilled shirt and spotless black, to do honour to the solemnity of the occasion. His wardrobe was contained in a superb new carpet-bag—a white pointer standing on a sumptuous red ground—that had long been the pride of the village shop. Just as the host's plough-horses tightened the rope-traces, and set the venerable rattletrap in motion to the crack of the driver's whip, a voice from behind shouted "halt," with a profusion of apologies. The breathless village postmaster tendered the gracious Baron a packet of letters that had just arrived. Ralph took them and glanced over the addresses. One was from his sister. He would have dreaded the opening it yesterday; but things had changed since then. Now he delighted to think of the happiness she would find in his answer. With the new future that had opened before him, he easily stifled the slight pangs of remorse her hand-writing caused. An apology to his companions, and he tore the letter open and laid himself back to read it.

CHAPTER XIV.

"TAKE HIM AND BE HAPPY."

HARDCASTLE, turning in his corner, cast furtive glances at Ralph as he read. He saw very little to gratify any curiosity he may have felt. What would have touched Ralph deeply yesterday—torn him even—now almost made him smile. His heart bubbled over with happiness when he thought of the gladness he had in his gift for the writer; of the wretchedness he had seemed constrained to condemn her to.

Alice's letter was not very long. She remembered how fondly her brother had loved her, and she thought if a bare allusion to her feelings did not move his, prayers or arguments would go for little. She affected—if it was affectation—never to doubt her success. Had she only surmised how near she had been to utter failure!—

"Barham, August, 1862.

"MY DEAREST RALPH,—

"I PRAY God this letter may reach you at Hepenstall, for I shall count the wretched minutes till I have your answer; but I know, when you and Mr. Hardcastle are together, how uncertain your movements must be. I do not pretend to write with any but a single purpose, and I go straight to the point. Oh, Ralph, when I promised that Philip and I should keep our engagement a secret till you gave us leave to tell, I never dreamed of anything so unfortunate as your being hurried away suddenly, and before you had time to

know him. I know well it is not in your nature to be unkind to him, to me, or to any one, and yet your letter from Paris makes not the slightest allusion to what we never cease to think of. I feel I have acted unjustly to Philip; and although he does not show it, because he knows how it would hurt me, I do so dread lest he should reproach you in his heart. Common gratitude, to say nothing of love, would have made me refuse to marry without your approval; but we were engaged, and I had no right to put Philip in a false position by begging him to conceal the engagement. His uncle is annoyed. It seems he had set his heart upon our marriage, and actually threatens to disinherit his nephew for not doing what he has done long ago. I can see the breach between them is widening; it soon may become irreparable. You remember how recent the reconciliation was; and this is all my fault; it all comes of my rash promise and—forgive me, dearest Ralph—of your preoccupations. I am utterly miserable as I write, and you can hardly fancy how anxiously I watch for letters, and how bitter is my disappointment every morning when nothing comes. I repeat, I shall never marry Philip but with your permission. I dare make any promise of that sort, for we are in no hurry, and you have only to know him to love him. But do, dear Ralph, write and release me. We *are* engaged: I have no right to be silent to his injury. Do not condemn me to the remorse of knowing I have injured the man ‘I love better’ ”—(the “I love better” was scored out)—“who loves me better than all the world.”

Ralph, as he read, felt much of the old jealousy of Bourke. Who was he that he should rush in to rob him of his sister’s love, to say nothing of the property

he had marked down for himself or his family? But, after all, on second thoughts, what did it signify—a few months sooner or later? In the course of things, so sweet a girl as Alice must take some one to her heart, and in his soul and conscience, on reflection and in his present frame of mind, Bourke might be as worthy of all he won as another. For the uncle's fortune, if it went to Alice after all, it was the destination he always suspected for it, and certainly he was not going to be jealous of his sister now. He owed her that amount of reparation, at least, for all his wrongs.

Brimming over with repentant affection, no sooner did he find himself in the Erbprinz at Carlsruhe than he devoted the five minutes before the departure of the London post to dashing off a hurried line to his sister. If it was curt, it was sure to be welcome, and there was no manner of compromise about it. As he felt then, Ralph Dacre was not the man to do things by halves. Perhaps he distrusted himself, and did not care to leave his remorse time to cool or let his in-bred selfishness bring evil council. Yet the Nemesis of his former faults stuck by him still. Even when turning a new page, common regard for consistency and his reputation forced him to soil it with falsehood.

“DARLING ALICE,—

“YOUR note was placed in my hands this morning as we were leaving Heppenstall. I read it *en route* and answer it immediately on arriving. I can't say how grieved I am that my carelessness should have caused you suffering. The truth is, I hardly took your promise seriously, and now I am in the confessional I may add that I was most selfishly preoccupied with bothers of my own. However, my dearest sister, I hereby most

solemnly release you from the rash vows that have galled you so painfully, and, with these sad complaints of yours ringing in my ears, you surely don't imagine I should let you shackle yourself with another. Why should I? I know little of Bourke personally, it is true; but I have all the faith in the world in your taste and judgment. I might have fancied the latter had been shaken with the shock of the fall when you tumbled into love; but, then, all the people at Barham seem as much in love with your adorer as yourself, and I don't suppose he has bewitched them. So, if his uncle, as you imply, means to make him his heir, marry him, my dear Alice, when you will. I shall be home forthwith to see to your interests, and make myself generally unpleasant.”

Conscience whispered Ralph he had better say nothing of the happy disclosure that had revolutionized his views. Besides, there might be slips between the cup and the lip; no, no, that was impossible: he did not dare harbour that unwelcome thought for a moment. He merely added, in a postscript, by way of breaking the ice for announcements to be made on his return:—

“I half hope I have got scent of the means of proving the State's debt to my grandfather. *Nous verrons*. The money would be convenient to me now; but unless something fresh comes out, I shan't let the hopes of it delay my return to England.”

Hopes changed to certainties, or rather certainties realized themselves speedily at Carlsruhe. The packet lodged with the bankers was duly produced against the receipt tendered by Müller, and was solemnly opened by that gentleman in presence of Ralph, Hardcastle, the heads of the house, and a representative from the

Treasury. Herr von Propfenzieher's successor at the Ministry of Finance had the honour of submitting the claims to his master, who promptly recognized their validity, sent the claimant a courteous command to dine, entertained him with more feeling than tact over the manifold virtues and untimely end of his grandfather, but graciously intimated at leave-taking that the promised patent of nobility should be made out forthwith.

His claims admitted, and arrangements made for their prompt satisfaction, Ralph's business in Germany was at an end. He had but one idea—not to let the grass grow under his feet: to hasten home to England, realize everything speculative, arrange the account of his intromissions with his sister's fortune—in short, prepare it for transfer against her wedding-day. Hardcastle partly understood and thoroughly sympathized with his anxiety. He made no complaint of the holiday he had professed a longing for, being cut so unceremoniously short. Ralph deliberately blighted his growing court favour in the bud by his unconcealed anxiety to be away from Baden; and the new baron of Heppenstall, Mr. Hardcastle and *suite*—Roper to wit—took their departure from Carlsruhe with through tickets for Paris.

Meantime Ralph's letter to his sister had borne her its message of comfort, and had fluttered out of the postbag at Barham, bearing healing to her heart on its wings. As she recognized the familiar handwriting she could not repress the visible tremor that drew the attention of at least two pairs of eyes—those of Edith Rufford and Philip Bourke. For some time her nervous fingers trembled over the fastening of the well-gummed foreign envelope before they could tear

their way to its contents. Then, as she read, the colour, that had half faded out of her lips, came back to them, and they had never looked redder and more seductive than when they curved themselves in a merry smile. The rush of joys that had been dammed back for so long came dancing up to her eyes, as they laughed mutely across to Philip Bourke. That gentleman read the momentous missive forthwith as by clairvoyance, decided on a swift adjournment to the green brake in the neighbouring shrubberies so soon as common decency should admit of it; repentantly acquitted his future brother-in-law in his heart of the cold-blooded and malicious cruelty with which he had hitherto upbraided him; and, his irritation being soothed as by enchantment, and his saddened spirits coming with a glow, he troubled the Squire for a kidney in a cheerful, hearty voice, and made himself on the moment the life and soul of the breakfast-party.

The Squire, who had been in the way of abusing him heartily of late for loss of appetite, felt the young man had done him a personal kindness, the more grateful that it was utterly unexpected, and heaped his plate straightway. Rufford, surprised by the unwonted joyousness of his manner, looked across for an explanation, saw no letter in his hand to account for it, turned for enlightenment to Mrs. Rufford's eye, and had he been given to jealousy, might have traced the existence of secret sympathies in the responsive beams that brightened his wife's face. As for old Mr. Bourke, although his lips puckered in a certain satisfaction, his shaggy brows were knitted in the effort to lay hold of a clue that came scarcely within reach of his shrewdness. And Alice already was chattering merrily, as nightingales take to singing after a morning shower.

Clearly there was something up, evidently everything that had happened had happened to the satisfaction of every one. So like a sensible man Rufford turned to his breakfast, content to repress his thirst for knowledge, until he should find an opportunity of asking it of his wife.

Breakfast over, Alice glided from the room, and loitered a second or two in the hall. She knew in a second or two Bourke would join her, and, indeed, scarce had the hem of her flowing skirts vanished through the doorway, than he had cast himself on her trail, doggedly stopping his ears to some suggestions of his hospitable host, although generally the Squire spoke in tones you could scarcely pretend to be deaf to.

Alice that morning dismissed all idea of coyness. For long days she had been longing to make reparation to her lover for the trouble caused him by her fault and her brother's—well, it sounded almost like ingratitude to say it, now that dear Ralph had written so lovingly; but she felt it, and she must say it in sympathy for her lover—by her brother's thoughtlessness.

"I have such a kind letter from Ralph to show you. I shall go to the seat in the shrubbery when I have fetched my hat."

And Alice escaped up the staircase, as the voices of the gentlemen were heard approaching the dining-room door. Mr. Boycott, in his careless activity, might have issued from it sooner, had not the crafty Bourke, the senior, thrown obstacles in his way. So Alice descended by the back staircase, passed through the morning-room, bestowed a kiss and an appealing look on Edith Rufford *en route*, thereby sealing that lady's lips against the chances of *badinage*, and then made

her way to the innocent assignation whither her eager lover had preceded her.

"Dearest Alice!" was that gentleman's exclamation, as he anticipated her intended explanations by catching her in his arms, straining her to his breast, and covering her lips, cheeks, and forehead with kisses.

And in atonement for her brother's sins, sacrificing herself to her virtuous resolution of a frank display of her feelings, Alice made slight resistance, and was gradually persuaded indeed into making some timid returns.

"Dearest Alice, I read your brother's letter in your eyes. You see I have been studying their language, and can interpret them even when they are less speaking than they were now."

"I am sure, sir, they never betrayed me, when I intended to have any secrets for you. But I brought you here on purpose to give you Ralph's letter. Oh, Philip, it is so kind, so like his real self."

"Thanks, darling, but I have neither eyes nor time to spare for it now. You shall tell me its contents."

"Well, but you don't seem to care to hear it," murmured the young lady, after a moment or two, during which Bourke's lips had been too pleasantly employed otherwise, to have anything to say on the subject of Dacre's letter.

"I shall be very anxious to hear it, you may be sure, for next to your love, I would have given almost anything for your brother's friendship. But in the meantime it is quite enough for me to know that he gives his consent to our wedding. When shall it be, Alice? we must settle that immediately. Only think how long we have been waiting."

"I really can't remember exactly," rejoined Alice, laughing. "Let me see, it was last Monday week, I think, that you——"

"Ay; but what long days since; each of them has seemed an eternity to me, and in common fairness in arranging our marriage day, they should count for months. Own now, Alice darling, they have dragged with you almost as slowly as with me?"

Alice sighed assent at the recollection, and yielded herself to the closer pressure of the arm round her waist. After the embrace that ratified the former betrothal, they had disposed themselves comfortably on the seat, and seemed to have no immediate intention of leaving.

"You see, dearest," proceeded Bourke, rightly interpreting the sigh—"you see, dearest, the months of penance we have gone through must be deducted from the days of purgatory that are to precede my entering paradise."

"An Irish compliment, sir. I should hardly have fancied the present place and time your ideal of the gates of purgatory."

Bourke did not condescend to reply in words, but took the readiest means that occurred to him, of discussing the malicious construction put on his language. Alice again recalled him to Ralph and his letter. Her very happiness with her lover recalled the memory of all she had enjoyed with her brother. She could not bear the being ungrateful to one she was tumbling from his niche in the innermost sanctuary of her heart, a niche he had worked out for himself by long years of patient tenderness. The moments of unmingled bliss the luckiest of us pass on earth, may be counted on the fingers. She thought with what would have been bitter-

ness, had it not been for the floods of intense happiness it was swamped in, of the harsh injustice her thoughts had done her brother in the last few days. She knew that Philip must have mentally treated him infinitely worse. It was selfish treason to her brother's love, that she should leave her lover to his delusive impressions a moment longer than she could help.

So she positively insisted on submitting her brother's letter, and her lover consented at last to hear it read—and read it was, with such interruptions, as the circumstances and certain allusions in it imperiously demanded.

"Is he not a noble fellow, Philip?" exclaimed Alice, enthusiastically. "If you knew his quiet, serious manner as well as I do, you would feel how kind it is of him to write so playfully as he does, and to throw himself so warmly into our affairs, when he has serious troubles of his own. Poor dear Ralph, I heard your uncle and Mr. Rufford talking the other day, and I fear he has lost heavily by that unlucky bank, even for a rich man like him. Then you know, Philip," added Alice, half blushing, and looking down, "I think he must feel a little losing me,—we have lived so long together and been so much to each other,—and yet he says not one word of it, in case it should spoil my happiness."

That last was the most telling argument which Alice could have addressed to Bourke in favour of her brother. For in that he could thoroughly feel with Ralph; as they sat there, and as he pressed her to his heart, and conjured up the happy picture of their future hearth and home, it required no effort of imagination to fancy how sensitive any man might be to a loss like that. So dismissing the last shadow of any rancour that might

have lingered, he spoke as heartily of her brother as even Alice could wish, and then the two reverted to those more personal matters, that made the hours fly like minutes till the lunch-bell boomed across the lawn.

"Two o'clock, Alice. Good heavens, quite impossible; did you ever hear of such a thing?"

"Never," rejoined Alice, very truthfully. Indeed never before had she been in circumstances to put the possible velocity of time to so crucial a test. "And we have been here since after breakfast, Philip. Whatever will they think of us? Whatever will they say?"

"Think the truth, no doubt, dearest, though they won't say it out at lunch probably before the servants. And after lunch, when Mrs. Rufford drags you off to demand your confidence, I shall announce everything to my uncle and Mr. Boycott, and to Rufford, indeed, for there need be no more mystery in the matter; we have had enough of that sort of thing."

"But lunch will be such a terrible ordeal, and as for eating anything——"

"I don't know that that is of any great consequence. The day is hot, and no ordinary man nor woman either can compromise him or herself morally by not eating. Come, Alice darling, after all you have not perpetrated a crime, and if you have, most of them know you have been contemplating it."

The expressive silence with which the luncheon party received the truants, deepened the blushes on Alice's flushing cheeks. Bourke brazened matters out with all the confidence of an Irishman, and established the average between his appetite and his mistress' by eating like a man who is conscious of an excellent morning's work. After luncheon, the programme was carried out as arranged. When the ladies had left the

room Bourke confessed himself to the gentlemen point blank. Mr. Boycott and Rufford were cordial in their congratulations. His uncle, in his delight, forgot and forgave all that had seemed unsatisfactory in his nephew's dilatory proceedings. He drew Philip to the window.

"So Alice Dacre is going to be Alice Bourke? Well, Philip, my boy, it's no use fighting against a vein of luck like yours. You've won the very nicest girl in England, or Ireland either, and now you may have the Tipperary properties, and the best part of a handsome sum in Consols whenever you like to ask for them. They're too fond of calling Irishmen fortune-hunters for us to give them the chance if we can help it."

"You forget another bit of luck, sir, that I've had lately—the making friends with you."

And Philip wrung his uncle's hand till the old man turned away, and drew his other one across his eyes.

"Pshaw, Philip! pshaw, my good boy! The less we say of that the better; but it's no use crying over the past. We must make the most of what future is left us."

Philip's and Alice's embrace in the garden might have passed for the rehearsal of the announcement that young lady made to her friend. Indeed, Edith led the way into the morning-room, shut the door, and opened her arms for Alice to tumble into. The whole thing was explained, and understood at once.

"I am so glad, darling. I'm sure, he'll make you so very happy," breathed Mrs. Rufford at last.

"He has behaved so nobly," murmured Alice, after a while.

"Well, dearest, you know I always have liked him, and I never doubted he would behave nobly, if the

occasion offered; but really I see no such great sacrifice in accepting you."

And she held Alice out at arm's length, and then turned her towards the cheval-glass. And Alice laughed and dropped her eyes as she saw her reflection look almost bewitching in the mirror.

"But I didn't mean that, Edith," she said: "I didn't mean Philip. I meant Ralph."

Ralph had reaped a good harvest of love from what he had sown in that grateful soil. His sister's thoughts were always disengaging themselves from her lover, and flying off to him. So she produced once more the eternal letter, and pressed it on Edith, whose curiosity being stronger, and her love of a different type from Bourke's, needed no such pressing to peruse it. And, even to Edith's jealous eyes, opened by the events of the last few days to the old garden memories, and ready to scan Ralph's motives more closely than kindly, the latter seemed all that was fond and brotherly. If he had been careless of his sister's happiness for a moment, he had pled his excuse frankly, and made most ample reparation. So Edith, too, recanted in turn, and, with the regret of a generous spirit at having done unwitting injustice, she mingled in Alice's willing ears the brother's praises with the lover's—and Edith and Alice between them, of course, swayed all the gentlemen. Ralph's repentance seemed likely to reward him forthwith, and he would return to repose among his friends and relatives on the beds of regretful roses they had strewed for him.

That afternoon Madame de Chaillot drove across to the Hall, and learned the joyful tidings. Mrs. Rufford chanced to receive her, standing on the gravel before the door; and the cloud that seemed to settle on her features

might have been the shadow of the black lace veil she suddenly let fall. Nothing could have been more sympathetic than the cordiality with which she seized the bride-elect by either hand, when she appeared a little later, kissed her on either cheek, and overwhelmed her with congratulations. And she was so curious, too, to hear of Ralph's brotherly letter. She manœuvred so artfully for a perusal of it that either her interest must have been very real, or she must have suspected the document to be a forgery. "Trust to men after that," was the burden of her mental soliloquies; and she might have had Bourke or Dacre or both in her thoughts as she came back on it again and again.

CHAPTER XV.

TOUCH THE QUICK AND ROUSE THE SAVAGE.

THE state of the Baden exchequer was not so flourishing as to enable it to settle on the nail the heavy claims of the new Baron of Heppenstall. The creditor was reasonable, and contented himself with such approved bills as could easily be negotiated: and thus he had virtually some 80,000*l.* at call with Carter, Calverly and Co.—the old Allonby bankers to whom he had re-transferred his account. He hurried back to town, determined to get in his hay harvest while the sun shone fair on him; to realize everything that was risked in the least recklessly, and place each shilling of his sister's fortune in responsible securities against her wedding-day. He would have liked much to have gone

straight to Barham; but that was out of the question. Business first, pleasure and family duties later. So he dropped Hardcastle at his den in Duke Street, St. James's, and drove on to Berkeley Square to bathe and dress and breakfast before the visit to his broker's, and the interview with the liquidators of the Metropolitan and Oriental.

The man who looks unmoved on the heap of letters that have accumulated in a long absence must be fortunately stolid, or exceptionally fortunate. The odds are so much in favour of repulsive reptiles of some sort lurking in the heap; and, as Dacre handled his, it was a foregone conclusion he had thrust his hand into a hornet-nest. Rapidly he ran over superscriptions, stamps, and seals in search of scorpions—not unsuccessfully. There was one on foreign paper, in a sprawling foreign hand—Gaboche. There was another in blue, wire-wove post, directed in bold, upright characters—and well he knew them—Asgill. There was yet another, with huge official seal—the bankrupt Metropolitan and Oriental. Nothing from Alice or from Barham; so he swept the rest aside, and gave precedence to these three. There was little specially agreeable in that from the bank. Things seemed to promise worse than the liquidators had hoped or believed, and they would be glad of the late chairman's assistance to unravel matters. Gaboche, dating three days back, wrote to tell his friend Dacre that he had stumbled most unhappily into some fresh embarrassment, and was coming over to London again, counting on his counsel. There were a couple of his great, square, enamelled cards, and he had called twice. But ugliest of all was the curt missive of Asgill:

“DEAR DACRE,—

“I HAVE telegraphed to Heppenstall on the chance, but they tell me you are expected in town daily. I MUST see you the moment you return. Come to my place, and, should I not be at home, wait for me. Until we meet I shall never be more than two hours away from the house.”

That one, while he dreaded it the most, he had opened the last of the three, and he never thought of the letters that lay unopened. Judge if his presentiments had deceived him. He knew better than most men what sacrifice other than money he had made, under the twin persuasion of illusion and despair, to buy this man off. And here he was back on him again, clutching at his throat, and here was his fellow hyæna, Gaboche, coming up for the hunt in couples, and opening his foul tongue in chorus. To think he, Ralph Dacre, should live to have such a summons sent him, the word “must” three times underlined, from a man for whom he felt a contempt that almost equalled his savage hatred; should receive such a summons, and—obey it! For Asgill had a hold on Dacre he dared not break from. He held him by everything his better nature and best affections made precious to him—by things compared to which, avaricious as he was, he held the money he was being robbed of as utter dross.

Dacre read the letter, and swore, cost what it might, he would disregard it; read it again, and rung to ask if his bath was ready and to countermand his breakfast. He would breakfast at the club or in the city. Breakfast, indeed! He had no idea of condemning himself to the needless torture of pretending to swallow until he should have seen this Asgill, and assured himself whether or

not he could really dash away the cup of comfort he was just raising to his lips. A knock at the door, and Roper entered again.

"The letters from the club, sir—Harrison has just fetched them."

Ralph took them with mechanical composure, and, when the man withdrew, let his eye fall fearfully on them. That uppermost—it was Asgill again. He took it up to tear it without opening it, and there beneath it lay one from his sister. There is no such mixed company as the contents of the post-bag. He knew so well the dainty little handwriting, and, as he held it hesitating, his lip actually writhed, and something like a tear trembled up in his eye. With what delight would he have opened the note had all been still as it seemed when he left Carlsruhe; could he have hoped to meet his sister as he had hoped to meet her then. Well, he would hear what Alice said. He crushed Asgill's note under his heel, and tore his sister's open. It was simple enough:—

"DARLING RALPH,—

"YOU have made me so very happy, and so we all are, I think. The one thing we long for is you, so say Philip and Mr. Boycott, and Edith and old Mr. Bourke, and all the rest of them. So immediately on receipt of this—that, I think, is your business term—start forthwith and come to Barham, be it only for a single night, under pain of my vindictive displeasure if you decline, under promise of such petting as you never had even in the dear old times, if you obey. But decline you can't, when your coming would complete my happiness. I know you too well, being

"Your very loving sister,

"ALICE.

“P.S.—I send this to your club, as the shortest and surest way to its finding you.”

Ralph would have sacrificed ten years of his life to feel as he had felt that morning, and been able to answer in person with a heart as light as then. Ten years of life, indeed; why, as he stood chafing there, he was ready enough to part with them all, and that Asgill might find if he drove a desperate man to bay. His health and strength seemed curses to him for the moment, and the prospect of an indefinite future clung to him like the scorching robe of Nessus. A man does not so easily shake himself free when he has once made a deliberate bargain with the devil, and if the fiend does give you a moment's rope, it is only to check you up all the sharper. Yesterday he had fondly fancied he might retrace the wretched past, and strike into a fresh path for the future, a poorer, a wiser, a purer, and a happier man. He had foreseen the symbol of what he hoped for in his first meeting with his sister Alice; he had looked to a hand-grasp exchanged with Philip Bourke as an earnest of self-sacrifice and self-conquest. He had meant to make for himself a little *fête* of his run to Barham. Now, he shuddered at the idea of all he had hoped to revel in, and the ideal he had cherished seemed sheerly impossible. He could not play the hypocrite with Alice now he had just breathed for a moment the heavenly atmosphere of something that for him was truth. He might have to go on groping through accumulating snares and pitfalls in the mephitic vapours of craft, guile, and falsehood; but, at least, he would not recommence his sacrifices to the demon that afternoon in the very sanctuary of family affections. Besides, all

considerations of love and morality apart, it is no easy thing for the most accomplished hypocrite to celebrate with a light heart the signing of his death-warrant, and that was very much what his last letter to Alice condemned him to. At any rate, Alice could not positively have expected him in England for another four-and-twenty hours, and so he had that space of reprieve before taking a decision.

Asgill was out and did not come in for an hour, and the hour that Ralph passed in pacing that gentleman's dining-room did not soothe his fretting temper. Heat it farther it could not: his passion already was glowing at a white heat. Asgill, although he did not expect to find his visitor in an angelic frame of mind, and had, in fact, been bracing his nerves for the meeting, started back at the sinister glare of his ally's eyes.

"Hah! Dacre," he stammered out, "this is kind, indeed. I have just come from calling at 'The Travellers,' and they told me you had sent for your letters."

He held out his hand, and Dacre grasped the wrist with a force that drove the gold sleeve-link far into the flesh. Asgill never felt the pain; the ugly light in Dacre's eyes acted like an anodyne. For a full minute Dacre looked him in the face, until the assurance that his tyrant was in actual bodily terror seemed to tranquillize him a little. So, then, he had still a power he might use in the last resort—a power that Asgill recognized.

"Look you, sir," he said sternly, "I hoped and believed I had made an end when I arranged matters with you the other evening in this very room—with you and your scoundrelly confederate."

"Fair words," remonstrated Asgill, as he began to recover himself, now that the first shock of the interview

was over, and he had again withdrawn beyond arm's length.

"Fair words, indeed: now, once for all, Asgill, we know each other, and for the future I use plain words, and as few of them as possible."

"Just as you choose. Then, in plain English, I was compelled to see you the instant you came to town, and before you had time or opportunity of communicating with any one else."

"Go on, then. Possibly you may condescend to explain."

"You are naturally impatient to know the cause. Very well. Five days ago you accepted a couple of bills for 3,000*l.* each, drawn at one month and two months respectively. I merely desired to give you a reminder, in case you should have chanced to have overlooked the transaction when it was brought to your notice."

"I accept a couple of bills for 3,000*l.* five days ago? This is neither time nor place for jesting, Mr. Asgill. I have accepted no bills of the sort, and five days ago I was absent in Germany, as you know very well."

"Precisely. You had urgent need of money; you remitted me the bills for negotiation, and very great difficulty I had, although luckily I succeeded at last. 'Gad, Dacre," said Asgill, with a grim smile—his confidence was coming back to him—" 'Gad, Dacre, you must look to it; your credit is hardly what it used to be. They put upon us most scandalously, but time pressed, and the money must be forthcoming."

Dacre sat all abroad. Asgill's words sounded in his ear, but he never realized their sense. And well it might be so.

"You see," proceeded Asgill, rushing at the leap that might land him he knew not where, although he had deliberately decided on it—"you see, *I* wanted money—more money, I mean. It's a long story, but I had pressing calls on me that cropped up since you did me the honour of dining here—I had no idea you were going so speedily out of town—and unless I could manage to meet them I must leave town, and for ever. I was desperate. I am desperate now. And if I carry things quietly it comes of the calm of desperation, and a desperate man must turn to desperate cures. If I smashed up, it was all over with me in this world; I'm too old a man to begin the world of London again with nothing but a blasted character to trade upon. Do what I would I could scarcely make matters worse; but I saw my way to salvation if I could lay my hand on 5,000*l.* on the instant. The discounters of course laughed at my paper, and, except yourself, I did not know a soul who would help me to a shilling. You would, I was certain, but then, most unhappily, you were away and your return uncertain. So, pending you're lending me the money, I took the liberty of borrowing your name. It's all the same thing, as I knew you would acknowledge the signature."

As Asgill explained, a variety of expressions coursed across Dacre's features—incredulity, indignation, amazement, fury; but, as the explanation went on, his face brightened up, until at last its expression was positively happy. Just as he had dreamed a vengeance that must have recoiled on himself, here was Providence or the devil offering him a safe one all ready to his hand. The only thing was, the news seemed too good to be true, and Asgill must surely be playing off an ill-timed

joke. The wary Asgill perpetrator of a forgery, and choosing to place the proofs of his crime in his hands of all the men in the world! No, he would not commit himself by giving premature credit to intelligence so welcome; and that Asgill should sell himself for 6,000*l*.—why, to Dacre the revenge came cheap, dirt cheap, at the money.

Asgill followed pretty accurately the course of Dacre's thoughts by the help of the treacherous emotions that betrayed them. Certainly his assurance ill-covered a certain anxiety, and yet his assurance was in good measure genuine enough. Dacre's thoughts worked by electricity, and the faster they worked the less he liked it. At last, seeing Asgill continuing obstinately silent, he spoke:

"I must say, sir, although I see no reason to doubt your being capable of that or any other villany, I should hardly have given you credit for inviting me here as your confidant. Assuming the truth of your story, of course you are prepared for the steps I shall take?"

"Assuredly. You will take up the bills when they fall due, and preserve a discreet silence in the mean time. Come, Dacre, all this fencing is no manner of good. I did not forge—You see I use sufficiently plain English even for you—I did not forge, desperate as was my situation, without knowing the chances were a hundred to one against my being punished for it. I have done nothing out of malice to you; but acted simply from sheer necessity; so, on second thoughts, you will never sacrifice yourself to be revenged on me. And suppose you do drag me to the Old Bailey, as you easily can, so help me——" Asgill swore a most horrible oath with a most unmistakable truthfulness—"so help me——, all

shall come out. I have letters of yours, as you very well know, sufficient to prove to the moral satisfaction of every one that you betrayed the confidence of your chief, Lord Bullington, and sold his state secrets for speculative gains. I can prove, and Barber will bear me out there, that you were a beggared man when you accepted the irresponsible management of your helpless sister's fortune. I can prove, moreover, that it was with her money you gambled in those desperately risky adventures which you nominally embarked in your own name, which you are still concerned in, and which seem likely to bring us all to such horrible shipwreck. Suppose, now, without going to the trouble of proof, I should simply call upon you to produce your sister's fortune and silence scandal?"

"I should produce it," escaped half involuntarily from Ralph's half-parted lips. He had sat endeavouring to bear up against the crushing words that rained down on him like the blows of a sledge-hammer; but blow followed upon blow, and his head gradually sunk, and a dazed expression dulled the lustre of his eyes.

Asgill stopped and looked at him keenly as he said, "I shall produce it." Then after a time he burst out, "So, Dacre, I congratulate you; you must have gone to Germany in search of a windfall, and had the luck to find it. Well, I am very glad, as I need hardly say, and that accounts for your bolting off at such a time. I see—I see; come, cheer up, and all may yet be well. But, as a matter of business and of safety, I must convince you of my power. You produce your sister's fortune to-morrow; very good. But then I tell my story, and remember it is your character, your reputation, your position I should attack, for these are what you hold to most. On you wold lie the burden

of proof. This windfall, be it what it may, would account for your having the money; but unless you could strike satisfactory balance-sheets year after year, it would only be evidence the more of the truth of my impeachment. And the higher you have stood hitherto, the louder would be the crash of your fall. Ralph Dacre's name would take historical rank on the swindler's roll with the Sadleir's, the Robsons, the Redpaths. His portrait would figure in all the illustrated prints, from the *London News* to the *Police Sheet*. His name would be the nineteen days' scandal of the clubs, bruited about and chuckled over by every blackguard in the pothouses. Whether the law branded it or not, he would have drawn down undying ignominy on his unoffending kindred, and——"

Ralph's head had sunk in his hands; his mind was busy conjuring horrible pictures—pictures such as Asgill's inventive fancy was utterly unequal to. No man had clung more sensitively to the shadow of a reputation than he; it was that had led him first into his fatal career. And few selfish men had ever cherished warmer domestic affections: the idea of being betrayed to Alice as the robber, as the Judas brother who had swindled her with treacherous kisses and false blandishments, stung him in a way of which Asgill could have no conception. Yet he listened while being martyred, and Asgill touched him to the bleeding quick when he coupled with Alice the ignominies he had tempted him to. The sleeping tiger woke in him, and with a bound he was on his feet. Well for Asgill that in his excitement or his prudence he had risen from his seat as he spoke, and was now pacing the rug. Well for him, that as Ralph bounded forward, his foot caught in the carpet, and as he fell, his forehead struck heavily on

the corner of the chimney-piece. Asgill muttered something that sounded like a prayer of thankfulness, as pale and trembling he looked down on the senseless form at his feet. More than once in his life he had stood face to face with imminent peril; never perhaps had he come nearer death than then.

CHAPTER XVI.

“THE SLINGS AND ARROWS OF OUTRAGEOUS FORTUNE.”

ASGILL stared at Ralph, rather afraid to touch him: too thoroughly scared to restore immediately the cause of the terror he was quivering from. For a moment, he rather wished he were well rid of his visitor. Then he recollected that he could not spare his banker, and that in any case taps on the forehead did not kill men with constitutions like Dacre's. So he seated himself in his arm-chair to collect his thoughts and let his excitement calm down. Then he got up, went to a cupboard, helped himself to brandy, and filling the glass again, proceeded to bathe his “friend's” forehead and lips. Ralph opened his eyes to stare wildly and to shut them: he looked a ghastly figure enough as the movement made the blood flow freely from a cut on the temple. As Asgill relieved him of his neck-scarf and began to stanch the blood with it, he gradually regained consciousness, and as he regained consciousness, he shook himself from the ministering hands of the other, with a vigour that was proof enough, had proof been needing, of there being plenty of life left in him.

“As you please, Dacre,” exclaimed Asgill, tendering him the neck-tie: “be your own surgeon if you will, only do something. You begin to bleed like a pig, and will soon be weak as a cat.”

Ralph took the hint and the handkerchief. But although he felt faint with the bleeding, he was the brighter and clearer for it. Already he remembered all that had passed, as if the unlucky interlude had never happened. He got up, took the brandy bottle and swallowed a glassful in the teeth of Asgill’s remonstrance about fever. He stepped to the mirror over the chimney-piece, tore up his pocket-handkerchief, soaked it in the spirits, applied it to the cut, and then bound up his head with the bloody neck-scarf. Asgill did not interfere; he looked on with some apprehension, trusting and devoutly hoping that this lucky blood-letting might have cooled Ralph’s passion, or at all events, tamed his strength and ferocity. Then Ralph reseated himself in the chair he had bounded from, and confronted Asgill, who seemed even less at his ease than the wounded man. He thought, however, that if the other had strength for it at all, it might be more prudent to have the interview over at once, than look to renewing it shortly.

Ralph resumed it, pretty much where Asgill had taken to violently turning the screw, and very much as if nothing particular had happened since. But again the screw tightened on him relentlessly, and just as remorselessly as before, although self-concern and self-regard made Asgill employ more *menagements* as he manipulated it. The truth was, Asgill had deliberately assured himself of the strength of his position before he had tried the audacious resource he had been driven to. When a man, who is a schemer by training, forges in cold blood

the name of another to whom he has given desperate cause of grief, it is a certainty that in his opinion he holds the other hard at his mercy. Nor did Asgill overrate the sensitiveness with which Dacre shrunk from being branded an impostor before the world he had imposed on, from being convicted as the robber of the sister who had believed in him as in the Deity. Only he had counted without the reckless core of Dacre's character, and when you keep poking at a sleeping volcano, combustibles you know nothing of are very likely to explode from causes beyond its immediate control. So Asgill was civil, and as friendly as he dared; and he spoke with a certain earnest sincerity, which carried some sort of spurious conviction to a man who felt he must suffer himself to be convinced under pain of ruin.

"You see, Dacre, I'm devilish sorry, more sorry than I can say; but looking at it as a man of the world, what could I do better' you know I *must* prefer myself to you? I was compelled to sacrifice you to myself, if it did come to that extremity. And come to that extremity it did, or you may depend upon it that for my own sake I wouldn't have done what I did. Money I was forced to have, and that was the only way to have it. I had no one else to look to, and you and I had rowed so long together in the same boat, that you couldn't well throw me overboard. That was just where it was."

The argument was one that had a certain weight with Ralph at least; it weighed sufficiently to repress his rising excitement. Circumstances reversed, he might not have acted very differently.

"How long is this to last?" he muttered gloomily, more to himself than to Asgill.

Asgill took him up eagerly.

"Only clear me this time, Dacre—myself and Gaboche, for he is too deep in our secrets to be cast over—only clear us this time, and I swear by all that is sacred, our business entanglements are cut once and for ever."

"You said as much the other day—and now?"

"Not quite as much, I think; and the other day no one could have foreseen such a concidence of accursed *contre-temps* as all this? At all events, I swear it now, and, as earnestness of my sincerity, shall hand you over every scrap of paper that has ever passed between us."

Ralph laughed contemptuously. "Without reservations? And then those moral proofs you threatened me with?"

"True," answered Asgill, gravely. "These are indestructible. But, at least, it should convince you I renounce all intention of using them, when I sacrifice the writings that would place my veracity beyond a doubt."

Ralph was bargaining, and that was everything gained for Asgill. They were working tolerably quietly towards the foregone conclusion he had foreseen. Ralph could not refuse the terms, and he began to plume himself on his moderation in not having made them heavier. For Ralph would pay anything rather than submit his antecedents to the scrutiny of the curious public. So it appeared, when Asgill named the sum beyond the amount of the bills, that he and Gaboche had pressing need for. Another storm, followed by another of the lulls that mark a calm, and are ominous of sleeping violence and fresh tornadoes. More bargaining, and a final arrangement, and Ralph,

with hands that longed to be at the other's throat, and eyes eloquent of malignance, is turning over and verifying ill-considered notes of his own, previous to committing the damaging collection to the flames. Each note meant little or nothing in itself; taking them together they wound him in a close-forged chain of damning moral evidence. It was late in the afternoon when he left the house, having previously handed his smiling host a cheque on Carter, Calverley & Co., that "cut a huge cantle" out of his latest windfall. Out of the windfall, he had confidently counted on to bridge the gulf that was yawning between him and honour, respectability, love, and happiness. He doubted much whether, weakened as it was, the bridge would bear. He was sure, if he reached the other side at all, he must be well nigh a beggar, and bound to forge fresh lies. He longed to know, and to assure himself at once of the passage, but, anxious as he was, it was late in the day, and he was forced to defer till the morrow his visit to his broker. Meantime his most pressing business was to change his disordered dress, and submit his slight wound to a surgeon.

Ralph had naturally sought safety and secrecy in employing a multitude of agents. He was not the man to furnish one individual with materials for compiling the financial biography of his last few years. Therefore, when he went from place to place, giving each his orders to sell such and such securities, no one expressed any large measure of astonishment. But all shook their heads, although men of their *métier* are slow to deny themselves a profitable piece of business. Things were very heavy; everything speculative had been steadily tending downwards of late, and all

that Ralph desired to get out of, was speculative to a degree. Then it was the deadeast of the dull season; next to nobody in the City, and slackness running into stagnation. Moreover, the most of Ralph's most risky dealings had been in the very good things strictly kept among a few; very remunerative so long as they flourished, but doing business that the most enterprising insurance companies looked askance at, and issuing share certificates sneered at in the way of security, by the most advanced banks. Throw any quantity on the market of a sudden, and, in default of buyers, you might as well give them away.

"Hah, Mr. Dacre, who would have dreamed of seeing you here at this season? The merest luck you found me here myself, hard-working man of business as I am, and there is not a soul besides on duty but two clerks and the errand-boy. Lucky I'm here, indeed. What can I do for you? Sell 700 shares Wheal Lucy tins, and 25,000*l.* of the Paraguay Loan of '56? Ah, you're coming round to my ideas at last. You know I always said it was a pity a rich man like you should deal so freely in 'rubbish.' But gently, sir, gently. Forgive my freedom, but is not this the zeal of a sudden conversion, and more zeal than knowledge. Last mail brings us rumours of a revolution at Assuncion; of course, they are always having revolutions there; and if this one is confirmed it will probably do no great harm; but, in the meantime, Paraguays are as heavy as a water-logged coal-barge. Sell half of what you talk of selling, and we should have a panic. Of the Wheal Lucy shares I know nothing. Here, Tom," to the boy, and he scribbled rapidly on a slip of paper. "Run over with that, and find what these are selling at."

The messenger came back, but he was anything but a dove of peace and promise to Ralph. "Heavy, very heavy, this morning, Mr. Dacre," said the broker. "Shall we go and find out the reason?" It proved to be a report of water in the workings; it might be true or false, but a sale of seven hundred would have flooded the concern completely.

It was the same story everywhere. Ralph could not possibly execute his original resolution, and cut everything clear at once; he could only have lightened his ship at the cost of the precious cargo of reputation he sought to save. Shipwreck sooner, shipwreck later; shipwreck seemed inevitable. If he precipitated things, it was certain. He decided perforce to realize gradually; considering the season, and an ominous concatenation of circumstances, his agents could hold out no hope of the liquidation being either very rapid, or very satisfactory. "Fortunate indeed, you are so well off, and only speculate for your pleasure, Mr. Dacre: the difference between what you can sell for now, and might have sold for three months back, would have been a handsome competency to many men." That was pretty much the burden of the melancholy chaunt, to which for a couple of days he went his rounds among his brokers. Then the arrows of outrageous fortune are less often shot singly than in flights. As he cabbed westwards, wearied, the second afternoon, he heard the vendors of the evening papers shouting the sensational contents of a second edition:—"Hawful powder explosion at 'Ounslow—stupendious destruction of life and property." He thrust a hand out with half-a-crown—evening papers cost threepence in those benighted days—and never asked for the change. There were more powder companies than one with works at Hounslow, but he was

the prey of presentiments. As he feared,—as he felt certain even before his trembling fingers had turned to the inner page,—the Patent Crystallized Powder Company's Hounslow works had gone up in smoke and roar, all that was left to mark the site a blackened ring on the common, some fragments of charred beams, and here and there a burned leg or an arm. With it was puffed away heaven only knew how much of his—of Alice's—money, for great stores of the explosive had imprudently been left in the vicinity of the works, and all was gone. True, the speculation had returned him the original capital and more, in the last few years, but then he—and Alice—had unluckily spent the interest, instead of placing it to a sinking fund to meet such very probable contingencies.

He lingered on in town, and every day he lingered things looked uglier for him. If they had only grown a little worse, he might have found a certain miserable comfort in being assured he knew the worst at the last; that the situation was utterly hopeless, and his character irretrievably gone. But he just trembled on the brink of the hope of snatching this and that from the fire, and in the penal fires he lived perpetual perplexity. A single false step, a few thousands up or down, large as was the sum at hazard, might make all the difference. For if he could not account for each shilling of his sister's fortune, and show some sort of plausible balance-sheet of the surplus of income over expenditure, he stood equally degraded and condemned in the eyes of those whose judgment he dreaded. If he went on selling as times went, his fate was assured: a deficiency there must be. If he kept on holding, he suffered slow agonies, as everything seemed steadily to change for the worse, and each hour to make his case more desperate.

He decided each bitter bargain in much tribulation, in the face of solemn warnings, and it was usually followed by remorseful repentance. He had to counterfeit jaunty airs of indifference in discussing transactions whose upshot might involve him, body and soul. Every one he dealt with treated him as a man of means who dabbled in the Stock Exchange for pleasurable excitement. By this time he might be said to have utterly renounced all hope of resuming the life of seeming luxury he had risked so much for! and now the parting with that hope seemed but light compared to all he was likely to lose as well. And Alice knew him to be in town—he had been compelled to intimate his return, feeling sure Hardcastle would do it if he did not,—and in the second of the two pleading, remonstrating notes, he had had from her, she threatened him with an immediate visit if his business really chained him away from her.

“Seriously, dearest Ralph, I fear the matters that keep you must be far graver than I can guess, or I am sure you would have been with me long ere now. And I can’t bear to think of your being so anxious and I away from you, nor do I intend to begin my devotion to Philip by neglecting you. He is quite as anxious I should come, as I am; he likes you so much already. So in spite of all I have said, don’t let this note bring you to Barham if there is anything in the world to prevent your coming. If you don’t answer it in person and appear in the course of to-morrow forenoon, I shall come up to town and be with you for dinner. It is no use whatever your urging anything to the contrary, and even if you telegraph no, I fairly warn you I shall disobey your most imperative commands.”

He knew her love for him so well, and she was just

the girl to keep her word. It was plain to him, besides, that the delay already must have made his prospects of extrication infinitely worse. His tarrying in London when everything seemed to call him to Barham, was enough of itself to change suspicion to certainty, should suspicions be excited later. Cost what it might, he must carry his body to Barham, although doubt and despair were busy worrying at his heart, and though he left his soul in the city. With gay, affectionate manner, he must help his sister to forward the event that set the seal to his ruin, and must waste in lip-lightness and playful blandishments, the precious moments that might spare him long years dragging on to perdition. But help for it there was none. His sister was beckoning; the devil was driving, and that afternoon he must go.

CHAPTER XVII.

RALPH'S EVIL GENIUS MARS HIS LAST CHANCE.

RALPH reached Barham, nervously sensitive to the fact, that his ghastly appearance might be quoted later as a *pièce de conviction* against him. If any one should ever pry into the reasons that had detained him in London, when feeling, love and duty were summoning him to his sister's side, they might start with the assumption that the business he had been concerned in had been preying on his conscience as well as his mind. The revulsion from sanguine confidence to sullen despair, had told terribly on a constitution worn by nights of sleeplessness and days of fasting. The gash on his temple, if it

made him look even more wretched than he might otherwise have done, at least extenuated his extreme pallor, and that was something. "He had slipped on a bit of orange-peel on the pavement, and cut his head open on the kerbstone." Roper, who in the capacity of valet, studied his master more closely than most, was not taken in by the explanation. He coupled the occurrence of the accident with the reception of letters so unwelcome that the rest had been left unopened and unread, with a breakfastless morning; with tumbled sheets; with drained water caraffe; with slovenly toilettes; with every sign of fever in the blood and veins. Contrary to his custom too, Ralph called him in to assist at attiring him for the expedition to Barham. No throwing himself into an easy morning coat this time, and telling the valet off-hand to tumble things enough for a day or two into a portmanteau. Ralph got himself up as if dressing for a fancy ball; with the elaborate effort of the man who is labouring after a careful disguise. And surely no one ever set himself to sustain a part more thoroughly foreign for the time to his true character. Roper, privy to it all, had his own thoughts of the matter. He did not dislike his master, but he loved Alice.

So Ralph reached Barham with a good deal of the look and air of the hang-dog, as he acknowledged bitterly in his inmost heart. He saw everything, not through the clear sunny country air, but through the tainted atmosphere that travelled with him. He read suspicion in every face, although it was only the refraction of the shy distrust in his own. Alice's eyes filled with tears, as she looked in his face, and eagerly demanded an explanation of his accident. Remorse was busy with her, and for the moment she was well nigh as unhappy as her brother. So the innocent

are ever suffering for the guilty; the sins of the fathers are visited on the children; of the brothers on the innocent sisters. And Ralph as he read her looks, felt his pangs redouble, and his awkward consciousness aggravate itself. Mr. Boycott came to the rescue in his bluff, hearty way, and dulled the sharp sting by the bruising blows of his bludgeon.

"Good heaven, my dear Dacre, it was high time indeed we had you at Barham. How miserably ill you look. What on earth have you been doing with yourself in London, man? Ah, we must find out; we must find out. Never mind though, this wedding of Alice's will set you on your legs again. We've all been at her to name the day, and she only waits your coming to settle it.

"Nonsense, uncle Boycott. Don't believe him, Ralph dear," remonstrated Alice, blushing and laughing. Ralph smiled and felt ferocious. This warm welcome was a mockery. He had been brought thither to name the day for his own execution, and in the meantime the hospitable squire was haling him into the torture-chamber, in which he was to pass the interval, and those others—Alice and the rest of them—were the sworn tormentors, pledged to exhaust their ingenuity in racking him with every refinement of agony.

Yes, he was there to name the wedding-day. Alice, who said the least, he might reasonably suppose to be as much interested in fixing an early one as any one except Bourke. His sense told him, it was his wisdom to execute himself with a good grace, and trust something to the chapter of accidents. The pressure might not come from Alice, but it must from some one else. Besides, he had a natural anxiety to know how long reprieve they intended to allow him.

"But enough of me," he exclaimed, after painfully parrying Alice's anxious inquiries through full ten minutes; "enough of me, and more than enough. Tell me something of yourself, dearest, and that will be the best medicine you can give me, for I am sure you are very happy, or were before I came here to disturb you. So you are determined to be married soon?"

"Oh, Ralph, that is only Mr. Boycott's nonsense. You know his way; he is so very good-natured; he sees old Mr. Bourke is anxious, and Philip of course is, or pretends to be, and I——"

"And you are at least as eager as any of the four?" said Ralph, looking down on her with a smile so melancholy that it must have shocked her inexpressibly had she seen it. As it was, her eyes were turned on the ground, and there was nothing but playful *badinage*—slightly tremulous—in his voice. "You are as eager as any of the four, are you not? Come now, darling, tell me plainly."

He could not help her further with more words of encouragement. He waited anxiously for her answer, through seconds that seemed minutes, hoping against hope. She tripped on slowly by his side. They were strolling in the dusk after dinner in the flower-garden—the flower-garden that had witnessed so many scenes in the drama of her loves—and his. She stopped to clasp both hands on his arm and look up in his face through the starlight.

"I will speak out plainly, Ralph, since you press me. It would be folly to play the child with you, and very unfair to Philip, for we have both tried him too long. Yes, his happiness is my happiness now, and he really is impatient, and I knew so well that in your goodness you had always set my happiness before every-

thing else, and so I promised him I should persuade you to name a day and an early one."

The blow he expected had fallen; had been struck him by the being he had loved most and wronged most, and although he had confidently awaited it, it did not fall much the lighter on that account. Alice felt his arm quiver in her hands, and among the rural sounds that broke the silence of the evening her ears detected something that sounded like a stifled groan.

Her heart was chilled, for it was not the reception she had looked for when she came with such a prayer to her brother. But it was herself she blamed, not him. In her selfish chase after fresh springs of happiness she had selfishly forgotten the brother who had made her happiness till now. She thought of her ungrateful forgetfulness; she had condemned him to a desolated home, nor had she ever given herself the pains to soften the shock.

"Oh, Ralph dear, do forgive me. Now I comprehend your feelings so thoroughly. I know you set my happiness far before your own, but it is just because you love me so much that I feel so bitterly how inconsiderate I have been. I know, of course, you would be glad I should marry Philip when I will, but you will not urge it on me, will you? Feeling as I feel, an early wedding day would make me wretched, and embitter our whole wedded life. Only don't blame Philip, for you know he does love me, and it is that made me so selfish."

For a moment it occurred to Ralph to take his sister at her word. Here was the first incident in the chapter of accidents he had counted on to give him a reprieve. If he wantonly wasted the occasion, lucky chance might never send him such another. And

in her repentant passion of self-sacrifice he might manœuvre it so that she should bear the burden of the postponement. A mean and cruel thing. But then he was comitted to a course where he could not afford to be particular. When a man is being hurried headlong to the brink of an abyss he is not over nice in grasping at the means of salvation. The fiend was busy with Ralph, and knew well where to find a footing, but for this once he was worsted by the angel that beamed out of Alice's sorrowful eyes. It was Ralph whose crimes had made these eyes sad when they should have been so merry. Her profound affliction at such a moment was the measure of the deep injustice he had done her. After all he loved her dearly, and through his wretchedness there flashed a single gleam of pleasure, as he felt he had still the capability of love and still the power of sacrificing himself. If she had doubted his affection in spite of his words, the fast embrace in which he caught her left her nothing to desire. Then began a contest of generosity. Now it was Ralph who urged a speedy wedding-day, and Alice who would not hear of it. Yet what could she do, when thoughts of treachery and unkindness to Philip came to back her brother's argument and welcome commands.

"Have it your own way, then, dear Ralph," she murmured at last. "If you will have it so, and Philip will have it so, why so it must be."

Lord Wharfdale, as it appeared, had engagements abroad that compelled him to leave England five weeks later. His lordship smiling at Alice, made it his very humble prayer that she should sacrifice herself, and arrange a day that should give him the pleasure of assisting at the ceremony. Alice laughingly protested the absolute impossibility of such indecorous haste, then

relented and consented. The day was fixed for something within the five weeks; Alice reconciled to herself would have been thoroughly happy had she not been so uneasy about her brother's looks, and as for Ralph, he had to make the most of the cheerless comfort of knowing the worst: of being able to number the days that lay between him and social obliteration.

He would have longed to escape back to town from the atmosphere of serene happiness that made him suffer so keenly; to carry his fretted nerves beyond reach of the mirth that grated them painfully. But immediate escape was by no means easy. In the first place, in the terror of coming disclosures, he was sensitively apprehensive of all that was likely to compromise him later. In the next, the people at Barham threatened him with a sufficiency of business by way of preventing the time hanging heavy on his hands.

"I'm glad you've come down at last, Dacre," said old Bourke. "Whether you meant it or not, you've done a very good-natured thing, and spared me a deal of bother. I'm too well off here to care to move, and if you had stayed on in town I should have been forced to come and see you there."

"I needn't say, Mr. Bourke, I rejoice I saved you the journey. Not that I mean to make a stay at Barham. I've a deal upon my hands with that Metropolitan and Oriental Bank and one thing or another, and I fear I must take flight again to-morrow."

"Nonsense, man; it's a bother, of course, although only a flea-bite to a man of your means, chairman as you were. But you know as well as I do that business of the sort is just the very opposite of game—it will keep any time in the summer season. Now we've got work for you here, and work that won't keep, thanks to the

impatience of your sister Alice and that foolish nephew of mine. I say, Dacre, what luck some lads have! How that boy has fallen on his feet! Bothered the other day to get credit for a coat, I make no manner of doubt; indeed, he as good as told me as much, and now of a sudden he drops into my money and your sister's, and comes out a full-blown millionaire. What's more, the money's the least part of his luck, and if he hadn't thought so the boy should never have had mine. Now you fellows born with silver spoons in your mouths, rolled in eider-down quilts in the cradle, never taste the luxury of wealth, as Philip's likely to do; and as for love and beauty, you look to buying that like everything else when you choose to go into the market. 'Gad, though, it was lucky for you, you had a couple of strings to your bow, and that your mother was an heiress. Heiresses run in your family. How well I recollect when I brought that miserable story of your poor father's circumstances over to Lady Dacre at Naples. The spoons that he left you were pewter, my boy, or rather plated; although, like everything else, they showed handsome enough in poor Wyndham's hands. Upon my honour, Ralph, I get garrulous in my old age, and don't pick my topics pleasantly, although, as you found yourself a rich man after all, you must long have reconciled yourself to the being sold so sadly about Allonby."

It may be guessed how gratifying the speech was to Dacre from first to last. What made it the more so was the doubt that would suggest itself, how far his old friend's stinging satire might have been intended. He recollected well that so far back as his step-mother's death the shrewd old gentleman had seemed to suspect his pretences and poverty. But if he had seriously taxed Bourke with trifling with his feelings, and divert-

ing himself with his wretchedness, he would have done him injustice. Any suspicions of Bourke's had been gradually vanishing until they had been finally dissipated by Ralph's straightforward conduct when his sister came of age. And had he not believed Ralph as spotless in his honour as he was easy in his means, he would have held a very different tone, and said nothing of all he did say.

Groaning heavily in spirit, Ralph made some common-place reply. He knew well what was to follow, and congratulated himself that he was standing with his back to the window in the shadow of the curtain.

Bourke went on.

"Yes, I counted on your being here for a day or two, and wrote to Pozzlewaithe, my lawyer, asking if he could manage to make it convenient to come to me to-morrow. He has telegraphed "Yes," and so I mean to settle matters straight out of hand, and should wish you to look after the settlement Philip makes on your sister."

Ralph muttered something again. Bourke proceeded:

"Of course it is a great match for him, after he and I have done all we can. Personal qualities out of the question, Alice Dacre might marry any man in England. Still we must do our best to make the hand of a Tipperary squire as well worth the having as may be. Hitherto I have treated Philip unfairly. I desire to make what atonement I can, and, as I daresay you know, have promised on his marriage to transfer him my Irish properties *en masse*. They will be worth some 5,000*l.* a year, and I mean to throw in another 30,000*l.* in consols. The young people have promised to live in Ireland a part of the year. The old barrack is settling

into the bogs, and Philip must begin by dabbling in stone and mortar."

"But yourself, sir?" Ralph stammered out.

"Myself! Oh, you may make yourself quite easy on my account. My wants are few, and I reserve myself more than enough to supply them many times over. I believe in Alice as our Tipperary tenantry do in the Virgin, and though I don't think much of men as a rule, I have no reason to misdoubt Philip, or, with my consent, he should never have had the girl. But I don't mean to give him the chance of turning out a male Regan or her a Goneril. No, no, Dacre. After the 30,000*l.* are transferred, there is more left where that came from."

Ralph had had no conception the old gentleman had been so well off. When he had schemed for his fortune and dreamed of it, he had never dreamed of so much as that. Even Bourke's more explicit language, since Alice's brother might claim a right to know something of her lover's prospects, had only partially enlightened him. He could not help thinking what a godsend it might have been had the generous Irishman dropped off from a world he had tired of in fair fulness of years, leaving Ralph the succession he had once believed he had so good a chance of. Now it went to Alice, and that was something, but then Alice was already rich beyond her wants. He envied her, and could not help it; but he had little time for envy or acquisitiveness then: he knew there was much worse behind.

"So I shall instruct Pozzlewai the," Bourke went on, "to make all hard and fast on Philip, and it is for you to look to the matter of the jointure. All I stipulate is, it must be liberal; in fact, with the fortune she brings

her husband, that follows as a matter of course. And as for her wealth, see that settled as strictly upon herself as you please. Of course as far as administering it goes, it can't be left in abler hands than yours; and I fancy, if you are willing to accept it, most of the trouble of the management will devolve on your shoulders. As matter of propriety, and in case of accidents, there must be other trustees joined with you on the settlement, I suppose; although I make no doubt they will prefer to be sleeping partners in the concern, and leave you the lion's share of the work."

So there was to be no more delay. On the morrow he was to render a detailed account of his stewardship, and commit himself beyond the possibility of subsequent subterfuge; and how playfully the usually saturnine Bourke went on pulling at his heart-strings. Ralph forced a grin, although his eyes sadly belied it, and it was anguish instead of mirth that twitched the quivering muscles.

Pozzlewaihe, exceedingly courteous to the rich brother of the wealthy heiress, was an excellent man of business.

"Mr. Bourke says very properly, in the circumstances we cannot be too liberal in the matter of jointure. In fact, as far as my experience goes—and I think you will agree with me, Mr. Dacre—he almost pushes liberality to extremes. Half the rental of the properties, in the event of your sister surviving, with living issue of the marriage; the free life-rent of the whole should her husband leave no children."

Ralph admitted he could ask for nothing more.

"Then with regard to her fortune. The principal to be tied up hard and fast, for her exclusive use and benefit; your opinions guiding us as to the liberty

accorded the trustees in matter of investment. And, by the way, Mr. Dacre, what may be the figure of your sister's fortune?"

Ralph was ready with his answer. He had weighed it sufficiently beforehand. He gave the total as it had passed into his charge, with a fair sum calculated for economies during his administration.

"Captain Bourke is a lucky man, Mr. Dacre—lucky every way, if you will forgive my freedom in saying so." Mr. Dacre frowned; and the observant lawyer proceeded somewhat hastily, —

"I presume, invested chiefly in Government Securities and on mortgage?"

Mr. Dacre frowned again. Mr. Pozzlewaihe had made the observation in all good faith, without an idea of indiscretion, and began to think the commissioner on the opposite side was as touchy a gentleman as he had often to deal with. Ralph, just as quick as the other, and with his faculties nervously on the stretch, remarked the impression he had made, and regretted it. He smoothed his brow accordingly, and hastened to add—

"Well, no, not exactly. The truth is, Mr. Pozzlewaihe, I have been in the way of acting for my sister as myself, and dealing with her money as my own in a fashion that old-fashioned trustees would call dangerous. Sometimes hit, sometimes miss: on the whole, we have done neither good nor harm, and it will show much the same results as if it had been invested in real security."

He spoke with great nerve: but how devoutly he did wish that he had only been speaking the truth—that he had come clean-handed and pure-tongued to the conference. He went on—

"And my own accounts are so involved with my sister's that really on the spur of the moment I can hardly give you the detailed information you ask."

Mr. Pozzlewaithe shook his head involuntarily. It was not a way of doing business he was used to.

"But," added Ralph, with all the more assurance for that mute protest, which did not escape him, "but on or after the wedding-day I shall transfer Miss Dacre's fortune according to accounts I shall submit, either in investments within the provisions of her settlements, or in money placed to her account with her bankers."

Mr. Pozzlewaithe bowed, perfectly satisfied, and proceeded to the discussion of other details of the settlement. Ralph followed the discussion with an outward attention that did him credit. Neglecting, perforce, his sister's interests in his unconquerable abstraction,—although, fortunately, there was no danger of their being disregarded,—he assented to all the proposals that fell on his heedless ear. He had burned his bridges with a vengeance, and now there was no retreat for him. Mr. Pozzlewaithe subsequently remarked that Mr. Dacre was by no means so excellent a man of business as he should have fancied him, and that in the event of his having to deal with sharp practitioners, it might be quite as well if he placed matters in the hands of his solicitor.

"Whom do you suggest for trustees, Dacre?" asked Bourke. "Yourself for one, of course? Rufford, I was thinking, we might persuade to be another. He is lazy, it is true, but he will have little to do but ratify other people's decisions, and he has plenty of sense and leisure. He may pass for the one from our side; the third, of course, should be from yours. Whom do you suggest?"

Ralph had a flash of hope that he might find another unbusinesslike friend of the family to lead quietly by the nose.

"What do you say to Mr. Boycott?"

"Ay, I thought of Boycott, but it's hardly fair asking him. The sort of thing's not at all in his way, and the bare idea of the responsibility might bother him. You agree with me?"

Ralph could not say he did not. His faint flush of hope faded. Besides, after all, he was already over the boots in the holding mud, and past extricating in that way; and the bolder his course of procedure now, the pleasanter it made matters in the meantime.

"Then if you leave it to me, Mr. Bourke, I do not think we could do better than prevail on one of my sister's solicitors to act. It's all very well throwing the responsibility on me, and I would do anything for my sister Alice, but it would be a relief to my mind to have a good business man of unimpeachable character in the trust."

"Very good, Ralph; it's quite needless, I should say, but that's a matter of feeling of which no one can judge like yourself. So if you please we shall consider that settled."

Ralph undertook to explain to his sister what they had arranged for her. It was a subject, of course, in which she took little interest, but she listened nevertheless.

"Well, Ralph, there's one thing I'm very glad of in all this. You won't have half so much trouble for the future about that stupid money of mine. I am sure I ought to be more grateful to you than I can say, for all you have done." She passed her hand caressingly down his arm, laid it on his coat-cuff, looked up lovingly

in his eyes. "I do hope, dear, my marrying won't make you uncomfortable, and leave you disconsolate; at least, not very, because I rather hope it will a little, you know, just enough to make you find a wife yourself. You are so nice, and so rich, too, that you have only to pick and choose."

Ralph sighed, and tried to rally her.

"With the very slight foretaste you have had of the pleasures of matrimony, Miss Dacre, is it not somewhat rash your recommending it to other people?"

Alice heard the sigh, and scarcely attended to the words. The smile passed from her lips as she pressed them on her brother's sunken cheek.

"I am sure, Ralph, you have heavy troubles of your own, or in your unselfishness you would not be sighing now. I have tried to drive the thought away from me, as if that could cure you, but come back it will. You strive to be cheerful, and you may succeed in deceiving others, but I know you best of them all, and my love tells me your health is suffering and there is a silent sorrow at your heart. Oh! if you would only be frank with me as you used to be, I would give anything in the world to make you happy again."

"Even Philip?" asked Ralph, trying to laugh.

"Perhaps Philip, if you asked it in earnest. But it is not Philip: I know you too well to fancy that anything likely to make my happiness could ever be a grief to you. No; pray do not trifle with me when I am so serious. Give me one more proof of your love, and tell me your troubles. If I cannot help, at least I may comfort."

What an opportunity for Ralph! Was it his good angel whispering him once more, before she took flight

for ever? Was it the last chance offered him of saving virtue and reputation from utter shipwreck by full confession and repentance? If in that moment of abandon he told his sister all, she might shrink at the avowal, but he knew it would be only to nestle back the closer to him. She would forgive him freely, feel he needed her the more, and her affection would find extenuation for his guilty lapse from honour. Honour!—it was no longer a question of honour at all: it was matter of simple honesty: of the vulgar virtue, breaches of which condemn men to the police-cell, the treadmill, and the hulks, the prison garb, the cropped head, and the convict company. How venture on such an avowal to his sister, and shatter the image she had shrined for holy worship in the inner recesses of her heart? Impossible! And yet one word to her would screen him from the censure and contempt he waited from the world. She might account naturally for this dwindling of her fortune yet. No, the moment before he had explained its precise total to Pozzlewaithe, and that gentleman had carefully noted down the amount, and doubtless submitted it to his principals. His own deceits were still hunting him towards his doom, and his own hand had just bolted the door his sister would fain have opened him. And yet—and yet——

Alice eagerly watched the course of the internal struggle, not daring to interfere otherwise than with those pleading eyes, so full of love, and hope, and pity. Had Ralph ventured to raise his own to hers, in spite of all, they might have influenced him to embrace that fleeting chance of safety. But never had he felt so humbled or so shame-stricken with the withering sense of shabby guilt, than at the moment when free pardon

and an act of absolute oblivion was to be had for the taking.

In that crisis of his fate, the door opened gently: they had been talking in the morning-room. The servant looked embarrassed enough when he saw brother and sister start asunder from the tender attitudes in which he had surprised them. But there was no help for it, and no backing out, and he came forward tendering a card upon a salver.

"Beg pardon, sir, but a gentleman has just driven over from the station; says he came down from London on purpose to see you."

Ralph had a shudder, as if the man were offering him a centipede, but he took the card. "Mr. Asgill." His presentiment had not deceived him. "Tell him to go——" was his first idea; "tell him I'm particularly engaged," was his second; "tell the gentleman I shall be with him immediately," was his third and final one.

"You won't leave me now, and without an answer, Ralph?" exclaimed his sister, as he rose to follow the servant when the man had left the room. "Now I *know* you have a sorrow, and you shall tell me what it is—I've a right to know."

"Nonsense, nonsense, little inquisitive," said Ralph, with a mighty effort. "Tell yourself your fancy has played you false, and then you'll know the truth, I'm out of sorts with a town life, that's all: a little worried with money trifles."

She threw her arms round him, refusing to be put off so; but again the door opened, and this time it was Mr. Boycott who looked in. Ralph took advantage of the second interruption to tear himself away. As he left the room the last he saw was Alice's tearful eyes

full of a wistfulness that haunted him long after. The interview that might have saved him was over, and what had come of it? Only the seeds of bitter memories for the future: the recollection that his sister had wooed him gently to confession and penitence, and he had impenitently guarded the secret of the mean wrong he had done her—guarded it till exposure became inevitable.

CHAPTER XVIII.

RALPH TRUSTS HIS DESPERATE FORTUNES TO ROCROY.

RALPH found his visitor in the drawing-room, being entertained by Mrs. Rufford. Edith knew nothing of the stranger, and was exerting herself to make things pleasant for Mr. Dacre's very gentlemanly friend.

As for Asgill, although he had rather lost the habit of ladies' society of late years, he had not altogether forgot the art of pleasing that had once come easily enough to him. There was a chastened deference in his manner, dashed by the pleasant friendliness at first sight of the man of the world who is used to find himself welcome.

As Edith was looking towards the door as he entered, Ralph had to clear his brows of the heavy scowl that had gathered on them since he left the morning-room laughing. Fortunately, the manner of English male friends when they meet is not *empresé*. There was nothing surprising, then, that Asgill should merely nod a cordial nod without offering a hand. His

tact told him the offer might probably have been rejected, and provoked a scene and a violent explosion. Ralph strove his hardest to seem civil, and subdue all signs of his simmering inquietude. Naturally, Edith left the friends to themselves, and speedily made her escape from the room.

“What the——” broke out Ralph, so promptly, that the emphatic vigour of his language was drowned in the closing of the door behind her.

Fast as he spurted out the words, Asgill was quick enough to cut across them; and the earnestness of the accompanying gesture of deprecation was sufficient to nip the violent apostrophe in the bud.

“Gently, Dacre—gently, my dear fellow, before you do or say something both of us may regret. In a word, I am here to do you good, and for nothing else. Now will you hear me?”

Ralph thrust his hands fiercely into the depths of his trousers’ pockets, as if he would pinion them out of the way of temptation. He threw himself back into a chair, but never motioned his visitor to another.

“Since the accursed day I met you first in the devil’s own paradise at Baden you never brought luck to me and mine, and you turn up this morning when, perhaps—— Well, never mind. Speak on; I hear you.”

“I can make all allowances,” said Asgill, sinking into the chair he had not been invited to. “I know I have done you a deal of mischief—involuntarily, as I have always told you—only, unfortunately, we were in partnership, and my ill-luck lighted on you. And it is just because I know all that, and am devilish sorry for it, that I am with you to-day to do you a good turn, and maybe, set you on your legs again.”

Ralph pricked his ears in spite of himself, and Asgill saw it. He had just let one rope that was flung him slip through his fingers, and here he had another. One was thrown by an angel, the other by his evil genius. No matter; drowning men can't pick and choose their saviours. He would hear Asgill to an end. That gentleman resumed.

"And so anxious am I to do you a good turn, that I put myself out of my way to come down here and meet black looks and, perhaps, insult. Yes, I might have written or telegraphed, and you would have paid no attention, and the loss would have been yours, and yours only."

Ralph loosened his hands from the bottom of his pockets, set himself a little less uncomfortably in his chair, and otherwise betrayed unequivocal signs of being interested.

"Yes, the loss would have been yours. You want money, and want it badly: and I have come for no other purpose than to put you in the way of getting it."

"I know your good things, Mr. Asgill. I've tried them once or twice too often."

"Perhaps so. But now, if I am not mistaken, you can afford to run greater risks. Losing won't hurt you so much as it used to, and winning may be pretty nearly everything—make all the difference."

Ralph winced.

"Forgive me, Dacre; I don't mean to pain you. But neither of us are the men we were, worse luck, and both of us have less to lose than when we first for-gathered. And the lady—Mrs. Rufford, I believe—happened to mention that Miss Dacre's marriage was to come off in a few weeks. In short, I knew that money

never came amiss to you, and I thought you might have urgent need for it now."

Ralph made no attempt to deny the impeachment. "Very well. Let me tell you what this new chance is; then take it, or leave it alone, as you like. You make a stray bet now and then. Well, I've got a certainty for the Leger."

"Bah! Is that what has brought you special to Barham—a certainty for the Leger? Why, so have all the advertising prophets in *Bell*. I still have half-a-crown left to propitiate the infallible oracles."

"Tut, Dacre. Whatever I am, you don't take me for a fool, and I'm quite sure I never suspected you of being one. This is one of the things the luckiest betting-man only gets on to once in a lifetime. Bar a *miracle de malheur*, you may coin gold. I talk French, you see; and, the truth is, it's a French horse we've unstabled."

"May I ask where, when, and how?"

"Assuredly. Nothing can be more reasonable. So far as I am concerned, you shall have no excuse for not profiting by my information; and if the race is run and leaves you penniless, you shall blame yourself, and not me. I don't know if you ever met young de Martimprey—Raoul de Martimprey. He used to be about with me the season before last. We put up together at Windsor for the Ascot meeting."

Ralph nodded.

"Very well. He lost a good deal of money to me one way or another. He fancied himself a better picquet-player than he was. He lost me a good deal of money, and owed me a good deal. I didn't want to be hard on the boy, so I took his note of hand, and let it stand over. I never quite lose sight of my debts; and

last summer, when I was hard pressed, I thought I'd look up M. de Martimprey. Without announcing my visit I dropped down on him at his château, near Chantilly. Found him at home, and forced to own he was desperately hard up, and, in fact, daily expecting an execution on his goods and chattels. Insisted on a settlement of my note of hand. No effects at his banker's, and no credit anywhere. I couldn't carry off the furniture, so I looked round the premises, saw a likely colt, just rising two. De Martimprey dabbled a bit in horseflesh, and occasionally ran a plater at Chantilly. Talked the young one's pedigree over with the fellow who did duty for stud-groom, and sounded his points; out of a French mare by Hermit—no less, and, in short, I liked him. Offered to play off my debt, double or quits, at *écarté*, and take him in payment if I won. Did win. Sent him to train with Prunet—a good man for a Frenchman in a very quiet way. Entered him for one or two things in England here, and brought him over the other day with the idea of getting rid of him, and turning my money. Liked him better than ever. Only sold half a share—uncommonly well, too—to Martingale. Sent him down quietly to a bit of a stable he has at Alfriston, on the Sussex Downs, and the other day we had him tried, with whom do you think? Buccaneer. Beat the Leger winner, sir, in a canter over a two-mile course, with six pound in hand. What do you say to that?"

"That he may be all you say," returned Ralph, striving to seem composd, but looking considerably excited all the same,— "That he may be all you say, and more, too; but that, in any case, I haven't a spare sovereign to stake on him."

"You know best about that. All I say is that, to the best of my belief—and I'm backing it pretty heavily—the event's a moral, and the race is won; that stake what you please, you'll never be called on to book it up; and that Rocroy—that's what I've christened him, in honour of the Grande Condé—that Rocroy's now at eighteen to one."

"Eighteen to one! Nothing very long when your horse is so dark. I should have thought the odds would have been longer."

"Avaricious! And so they were. Thirty to one only the day before yesterday. But now the nag's been coming first forward in the betting since Martingale and I have been getting on upon him. They'd have been shorter still if Martingale hadn't been in Norway, and only left a certain commission. Shouldn't wonder if it were even betting the morning of the race."

"That's just it," said Ralph, already musing aloud over the possibility of speculating; "it's too late to get on well, and scarcely worth the risking."

"Not a bit too late, especially for a man who can pay 100,000*l.* pretty near as easily as 10,000*l.* It's only a question of length of odds, but there's no difficulty about putting on the money. They are plunging tremendously on the Leger. There are Hawksby, his Grace of Glastonbury, Merrylie, Roodee—none of these believe in French horses; any or all of them will accommodate you to any extent; no fear of that. Only there is not an hour to be lost; you won't get on at the same price to-morrow morning as this afternoon."

"If I only thought the horse would pull through," murmured Ralph, half to himself, half aloud.

"Well, I shan't say one word to influence your decision; only I can't afford to throw away my own

chance, and I must be gone in ten minutes and look in before dinner at the corner. I kept my fly to catch the 2.10 up. If you decide to come at all, you had better come with me. Let your man follow later with your traps."

Ralph did not take long for reflection. Everything urged him to be off with Asgill. This sudden visit brought an excellent excuse for escaping the slow torture he underwent at Barham. That was so much gained; besides he could hear more of what Asgill had to tell him on his way to town, and make up his mind at his leisure. Hasty leave-taking and apologies to his host, a hurried embrace of Alice, who was fetched down from her bedroom for the purpose, and to whom he would permit no opportunity for a whisper. And Ralph stepped into Asgill's fly, and was driven off with him. Abuse Mammon as you will, after all there is no such peacemaker.

It was a sensation for the knowing ones when Rocroy came with so tremendous a rush in the betting. The afternoon of the day when Asgill ravished Ralph from Barham, pencils were busy at either end of the rooms at Tattersall's. Under the double pressure, the odds shut up like a telescope. Ralph and Asgill met in the middle with a leviathan commissioner, to whom the former had entrusted a heavy charge, and the faces of the two principals showed rather blank.

"Who the mischief ever heard of such a thing?" exclaimed Asgill ruefully; "what keen noses for truffle-hunting these fellows have to be sure!"

"Can't get on your money, sir, at the price, or anything like it; you see yourself it's no use," said Mr. Hedger, the commissioner, to Mr. Dacre.

That gentleman was ineffably disgusted, and disap-

pointed too. The castle he had run up in the air in the course of the last few hours threatened to dissipate itself just as it was being gorgeously illuminated with the rosy tints of hope. He bit the top of his pencil through, and turned to whisper with his confederate.

Asgill shrugged his shoulders. "Bar miracle or accident, the horse must do the trick, but it's infernally provoking for me, being baulked in this way. The tether of my credit's a short one, and I'm pulled up sharp already. As for you, it is different. Mr. Dacre of Allonby and Berkeley Square may take as much as he pleases at the odds he likes. 'Gad, Dacre, you know your own affairs best, but I should fancy it was much the same to you, whether you backed Rocroy at twenty to one, or at six, so long as you stood to win sufficient."

Perhaps so. That proverb of "As well be hung for a sheep as a lamb" has much to answer for. Ralph turned back to Mr. Hedger.

"We must do the best we can, Hedger. The horse has the race in hand."

"Well, Mr. Dacre, it must be a precious good thing, or you wouldn't be so hot on it as you are. If you mean a mucker, it's all right and clearly understood. It's the same to me, and doesn't greatly matter to you. After all, I suppose you're safe for anything, and if the worst comes to the worst, you'll only be scratched where another man would have his hide stripped over his ears."

The French horse became the fashion; there was a perfect fever to get on him. At the same time there was a monied party, used to plunge over head and ears, who would not hear of his winning upon any terms, and these gentlemen, taking advantage of the keen

competition, freely accommodated his patrons to any amount on highly advantageous terms. When Ralph that night abandoned himself to calmer meditations, as he walked home from dining with Asgill, he shuddered, in spite of himself and of all the wine he had swallowed. It was not so much at the fresh fashion in which he stood compromised, although that made his possible perdition doubly certain. But the day's doings had stirred him from the dull lethargy of his despair, and condemned him to a fresh lease of suspense. New hope was breaking in on the outer darkness; all he had fancied lost was trembling again on the turn of a card, and weeks had to elapse before the cards were dealt. Settling day on the race came off on the Monday—the day preceding the marriage. If the settlement were a good one for him, all might yet be saved.

So things went on for two or three days more. Talking of good settlements, the growing engagements of Mr. Dacre might have created considerable uneasiness in racing circles, had they known all the circumstances, and the precise value of their prospects. Ralph went about restless; his best distractions, interviews with the lawyers with respect to his sister's settlement. Their material interest in the coming race, although that of Asgill was a weaker one than his, threw them a good deal together. Ralph, indeed, was fit for no other company. He saw no advantage in suffering the gratuitous torture of a struggle to keep up appearances. The time approached so fast when the mask he had worn so long might be torn from him once and for ever.

One day when he had some absolute leisure on his hands, and feverish restlessness had free play with him,

it struck him he might do something to distract his mind and relieve his anxiety. He had never seen the horse he had loaded with his fortunes! Why not run down to Alfriston and have a look at him.

"I see no sort of objection," said Asgill, whom he found over breakfast, and to whom he broached the proposal. Hand me the A. B. C. Catch the eleven o'clock express. Telegraph to Eastbourne to have a trap waiting at Polegate Junction, and we can have the nag out for a canter, see him breathed, and be back for a late dinner. I should be by no means sorry to see him again myself."

It was a glorious afternoon—late summer or early autumn—as they dragged up the glistening white chalk road, scarping out of the steep landward face of the Sussex downs. Turning to breathe, as they walked up behind their carriage, the eye travelled over the rippling sea dotted with its white sands, along the line of beach bending by Pevensey flats to the brown cliffs and white terraces of Hastings; over the wooded weald, with its villages and church towers, and its middle distance simmering in a dull blue haze. Before them as they rose the crest, the golden stubble-fields, picturesque enough, but just sufficiently profitable, to show that man would do wisely to renounce his war on nature. And then the rolling stretches of close nibbled turf, gemmed with the earliest autumn wild flowers; the white-fleeced sheep streaming out and in of the banks of furze, and grazing amicably among rabbits cocking their ears and washing their faces. The larks in the air; the wheat-ears suggestive to the practical mind of Asgill of toast and bread-crumbs; the cloud-shadows dancing on the green, the sketches of blue sky flecked in places by floating sea-gulls; the white chalk

chines that here and there opened a vista down to the Channel; the grey church sheltering in the valley among its weather-beaten trees; the bluff farmhouses close hugged by the ivy, bidding defiance to the seasons with their beetle-browed roofs, and double casements; and above all the fresh ocean breeze that charged itself with salt and summer balm as it blew, and exulting in the merry sunshine tossed the shadows about in pure lightness of heart.

It seemed impossible to resist the genial gladness of nature, and Ralph felt it so far, as to be doubly melancholy. How much innocent pleasure is to be had in this wicked world for the gathering, and what a little thing may forfeit it, and how far it lies from the haunts and ways of society and the city. As for Asgill, in his chequered life, his duller instincts had undergone a longer course of casehardening. He was a man as good as ruined, with a heavy book on a coming event, and on his way to a training stable. His eyes and thoughts were riveted on the main chance; scenery and its charms were distractions he had no concern with. Does the welcher at Newmarket appreciate the golden tints of the furze on the heath, or has the betting publican, who drives his spring-cart to the spring meeting at Epsom, any ear for the liquid trill of the nightingales?

The quiet stables near the old village church seemed guarded with much the same precaution as the perilous Castle of Douglas. The new comers were reconnoitred and challenged, before they were passed into the trainer's snug little dwelling. Already Asgill had called Dacre's attention to the stealthy figures who had spied their advent, and slunk after them down the village street like famished wolves on the trail of a sledge in winter.

"Touts in force already; eh, Welter?" queried Asgill, reaching a hand to the burly, red-faced, good-humoured looking man, who came with a rush of fresh air from the downs into the little parlour.

"You may say that, Mr. Asgill; the vermin breed, I believe, among the furze like fleas in a hot summer. And just as irritating. It was only the night afore last, I caught one of 'em among the gooseberry-bushes in my front garden. Lucky there was a barrel with some tar in it handy, for smearing the fence. We just dropped him in, and——"

"Well, well," said Asgill, cutting him short impatiently, to ask the great question. "How is Rocroy, all right, eh?"

"If you can look me in the face, sir, and say you ever saw a nag in finer form, I eat my hat. When he goes to Doncaster, if they don't own that we know how to put the bloom on down in the country here, they'll be liars, that's all," asseverated Mr. Welter. "And though it's enough to make any man feel a bit proud, having such a flyer as that through his hands, between me and you, I won't be sorry when I hand him over. For the last day or two I've spent a small fortune in locks and bolts. I've done all you telegraphed, and put a couple of good men to watch him on and off; there's a blood-hound chained in the yard, and a couple of bull-terriers loose in the stable. His lad loves him like a twin brother, and never sleeps out o' his stall, and I don't sleep much at all now of a night myself, I'm so terribly afraid they'll be at him."

Ralph felt the counter shock of the trainer's anxieties. They brought home to him, how little you could ever make a certainty of racing; how many slips there might be between the cup and the lip. Why this trainer

might be a rascal, for all his honest looks—some one of his subordinates very probably was—no one knew better than he, how easily rascals were made in the ranks least subject to temptation.

His spirits rose again involuntarily out on the downs, whither the sheeted favourite for the Leger had preceded them.

“Think there’s anybody watching us?” demanded Asgill, turning his eyes round on a waste seemingly deserted, save by a solitary shepherd.

“Sure of it, Mr. Asgill. No, not that man, I know him well; but heaven knows how many blackguards are crawling about among them furze-roots at this blessed moment. Depend on it, more than you will hear of the horse’s gallop before the day is many hours older.”

“Never mind. It can hardly send him to shorter odds, and we haven’t run down to-day, to make a wild-goose chase of it—eh, Dacre.”

“Just as you please, gentlemen. Will you have his clothes off?”

“By all means.”

Rocroy stripped superbly. A bright bay standing something like fifteen hands; well set on head, a magnificent chest and shoulder, grand loins and quarters; a coat that glistened like gossamer, and an eye like an eagle’s. A horse that looked like running and winning all over.

“Ain’t he a beauty now, Mr. Asgill,” exclaimed Welter, himself in a transport of pride and admiration, passing his rough hand caressingly down the silken shoulder. Rocroy whinnied, bit caressingly back, and playfully struck out with his near fore leg. “And with the temper of a cherub,” proceeded the trainer, “you

might trust him to run for a life after a dozen false starts in a March hail-storm."

"The race ought to be over, Welter."

"All but the shouting, if he only get fair play, and fair play he shall have, if mortal man can give it him. Up with you, boy, and let the gentlemen see him move. Take him up to the white poste there, bring him down by the sheep-pen at the canter, and when I wave my hand, give him his head——. Now then, gentlemen, what do you think of that?"

"That it was well worth the journey to see it, was it not, Dacre? Now we may go back a good deal more easy in our minds."

Nowhere are appearances more deceptive than on the turf, where a fortune may treble upon an extra ounce in the scales, and matches over miles be decided by half a head. But Ralph did feel considerably more comfortable, as he marked the grand sweeping stride of Rocroy. He was inclined to take the race as decided if all went well; but then the accidents. Suppose, for example, Rocroy put his foot in a rabbit-burrow and snapped his leg at the fetlock. Well, it was false philosophy setting himself to the task of self-torment, and had not his mind been shaken by repeated shocks, he would never have thought of discounting the terrors of the future. In short, although in the course of their stay at Alfriston, clouds had come rushing up over the clear sky, though the fresh breeze had sunk in a sultry calm, and the golden shimmer of the downs was fused into black shadow; in short, although everything around him announced the ominous lull that heralds the coming storm, Ralph was in infinitely higher spirits going back than coming out.

And accordingly in so much better spirits did he

seem, that the following day, he dared a flying visit to Barham. Alice welcomed him in delighted surprise, and strove to lend herself to the illusions of gaiety that was scarcely forced for the time. He was like the man who flushes himself with wine at an unholy orgy—he is as buoyant for the moment as the champagne that foams from the flask and sparkles in the glasses—but the reaction—the reaction.

“Shall I give Alice a wedding gift, or shall I not?” was the question over which he had vexed himself. If I give her one at all, it must be such as would come from the generous affection of an only brother, who has no family in the world but her, from the wealthy owner of Heppenstall and Allonby. And if I give her such a present, and if all comes out? What scoundrelly deception it will seem, this swindling her of her thanks and kisses upon false pretences; this parade of wealth and generosity with money meanly filched from herself. Then it occurred to him to wait the event of the Leger, and if all went well, bring her his splendid present on the eve of her marriage day. But no; what would the world at Barham think, if gifts came pouring in, and nothing came from him. Decidedly he could not venture to show his face there. Besides he had the superstition of the gamester; to harbour the idea of losing it would be as good as throwing away the race on which he was playing against despair. Best count it already won, and show a bold face to fortune.

So Ralph had made up his mind, and paid a visit to London and Ryders. It was like a page from the *Arabian Nights*, a corner of the Cave of Aladdin, the cases they opened for his inspection. Diamonds wrested generations before from the swarthy gnomes of Golconda and Minas Geraes; opals blushing as if they

had been just unearthed from the vaults of the Ural caverns; emeralds that might have gleamed in their time from the turbans and yataghans of the conquering races of the Orient, or perchance decked the collars of the bloodhounds of the Great Mogul; pearls that had paid the freedom of the divers who fished them from the treasure-chambers of Indian seas. Ralph gazed at them as they were flashed backwards and forwards in the light, with eyes that caught nothing of their lustre and thoughts that were wandering far away. He was hesitating over the sum that it might be most prudent in every way to give in the circumstances, so paid but slight attention to the stones or their settings. At last he made an effort and decided so far:—

“It is a present for a lady—for my sister—and it might be better she should make her own selection. It would be well, perhaps, if you were to send her two or three sets to the country and let her choose.”

“We understood Miss Dacre had arranged an alliance, sir. It was only yesterday Mrs. Rufford was here and made a selection for herself and Lord Wharfdale. Mrs. Rufford has exquisite taste——”

“Yes, I know,” broke in Ralph, brusquely. “Then perhaps you will have the goodness to send these and these and these others to Barham; or, stay, I go down to-morrow myself: you may as well let me have them at Berkeley Square.”

And arrived at Barham, Ralph was as shy of producing the splendid jewels as if they had been visibly tainted with the stain of felony. It was before dinner, when the ladies were separating to their toilettes, that he followed Alice up-stairs, and drew her aside into his room.

“You may well fancy I had forgotten you, Alice,

but I only waited till you should be sufficiently tired of Bourke to welcome a new sensation. I know how fond you are of toys still, so I brought you some of them to pick and choose among."

"I am afraid I do like them, Ralph, and I feared you would be spoiling me, and wasting your money."

She stood smilingly expectant while Ralph disengaged the jewel-cases from the silver paper. Although she pretended to be grateful as in duty bound, it was so much a matter of course that her brother should pay a costly tribute to the occasion that it would have been absurd to be very demonstrative. That would have been pushing hypocrisy beyond the proprieties, and no one disliked deceit or hypocrisy more than darling Ralph. Yet, when the cases were opened, she complimented his taste and magnificence with her unmistakable pleasure and admiration; and, although she did not profess to be a connoisseur in values, and was a spoiled heiress to boot, and used to flinging money about, she remonstrated earnestly against extravagance.

Finding that Ralph only laughed and would not listen, and knowing so well his ample means, she would not deny him for one more time the pleasure of spoiling her. Leaving him kisses in pledge, she insisted upon carrying the jewellery off to Mrs. Rufford for exhibition and consultation; and the consequence was that the two ladies came down very late for dinner, and created a sensation by bringing their apology with them. The brilliant stones caused quite a splash in the quiet domestic circle; even Boycott and old Mr. Bourke bantered Ralph after dinner on his profuse munificence.

"You can afford to pay for your whims, Ralph," remarked the former, "and certainly jewels were never better bestowed than on Alice, although no girl can

spare them better. I don't think I'm a niggard myself, but, if you were not so rich a man, I should preach you a sermon on your extravagance. Only fancy Alice buying such things as these for herself, heiress as she is."

"I'm glad to see the Metropolitan and Oriental Bank has touched you so little," whispered the elder Bourke, pinching Ralph's elbow in unusually friendly fashion as they crossed the hall to the drawing-room. "And I'm the more glad, that it shows me you've money for your wants and more. I like you, and I liked your father; and, if I hadn't made it up with Philip, you'd have found that I had not forgotten you in my will. Now, to be sure, you keep the money and the property in the family, and it all goes to your sister, and I can see the settlements completed without any after-thought on your account."

And the talk ran chiefly on Ralph and his presents for the rest of the evening, and, on the whole, his visit to Barham was one of the least pleasant of any he had paid lately, and that was saying a good deal.

"Dacre certainly does things *en grand seigneur*," remarked Rufford to his wife, when they had retired for the evening. Edith was gazing musingly out of the window, and never answered till her husband repeated his observation.

"He puzzles me, Richard," replied that observant lady. "He seems to do his best to forward the marriage, and so he ought. He loves his sister, I do believe, as far as he loves any one, and he knows her heart is in it; and yet I'm convinced he'd give these three sets of stones three times over if he could only blot poor Philip Bourke and the very memory of him out of existence."

CHAPTER XIX.

AND GOES DOWN TO SEE THE RACE.

ONE of those mysterious movements in the racing atmosphere which defy the researches of science sent Rocroy half a point or so backward in the betting the evening before the race. There was nothing in the world to explain it. Ralph drew his information from the fountain head, and the accounts of the traveller after his journey to Doncaster had been excellent. Still, in the circumstances, it may well be supposed this lengthening of the odds heaped fuel on the flame of anxiety that consumed him. He had betted chiefly through a commissioner, still he had done a good deal directly on his own account, and it was generally understood among the initiated and his acquaintance he had a pretty heavy interest in the race.

"Shut up your book on the Leger, Dacre?" queried Major Annesly, one of a carriageful with whom Ralph was travelling down to Doncaster on the very morning of the race.

"Yes, I think so; that's to say, unless you have something very tempting to offer me."

"Come, I will try and tempt you then: give you 7 to 3 against Rocroy; the quoted price in the latest betting is 2 to 1.

So it was, yet Ralph did not leap at the liberal offer as he might have done. It was much the same to him now how much he stood to lose; but anxiety as to the certainty of realizing his winnings took precedence even of the wish to swell them.

"Why, I thought you were sweet upon the horse, Annesly?"

"So I was, and so I am; but I got on pretty well at fairish odds, and now I think it prudent to hedge a little, that's all. Money goes to money, you know, and a poor devil on half-pay can't afford the luxury of books like you landed magnates."

Ralph shrugged his shoulders. Annesley might be on half-pay, but, in the sums that figured in its carefully-kept columns and in its results, his betting-book was a regular *libro d'oro*. However, as Ralph stood then, it was not worth his while to go splitting hairs.

"I'll take your 7 to 3 in thousands."

The major stared at him. "How you outsiders do plunge when you chance to fancy a thing. No, no, Dacre, I can't quite do that; I don't mean to upset my book altogether, but I'm good for half the money."

"Take the bet, Annesly," said another of the party, lifting his eyes quietly from his *Times*. "I'll go you halves."

Ralph did not altogether like this general readiness to accommodate him; however, there was nothing more to be said, and the bet was booked. They *could* know nothing unfavourable to the horse, and, after all, the more money he stood to win the better for him.

Asgill was standing on the platform when the train glided in. Ralph, restraining himself, nodded friendly farewells to his fellow-passengers, and then walked up to his confederate. His heart thundered against his ribs as he remarked that Asgill looked very grave?"

"Good heaven, Asgill! anything the matter?"

"Nothing, nothing whatever, Dacre; don't alarm yourself. At least I trust and believe there's nothing;

but of course, when men's books are made like yours and mine——”

“Speak out, man, for God's sake. I used to be cool enough once, but now my nerves are gone, I think, and my veins are filled with fire for blood. Have they sold the race that you know of? has any one got at Rocroy?”

“Not a bit of it, man; don't excite yourself. Every one says Welter's honesty itself, and it's true for aught I know to the contrary. He brought the horse through from Alfriston himself, and he's been looking carefully after him since. No; it may be nothing, and I daresay it is nothing, but there's just a touch of puffing in the sinew in that near fore-fetlock; he's got a playful way of letting out with it, you know, and it might be the suspicion of a strain. It's a nuisance that the course should be hard as bricks, but, after all——”

The sun was blazing down on them, as it had blazed for the last three weeks; but, notwithstanding, Ralph was shivering in a cold sweat, when he jumped out of the fly at the door of Rocroy's stables. Welter and the Doncaster gentleman both looked serious, but hopeful.

“God bless you, Mr. Dacre,” said the former; “don't you be put out. For myself I don't believe there's nothing in it. I wouldn't have given a thought to his breaking down, had I not known he was carrying such a precious pot of money.”

And there was very little to see, nothing to signify a whit, if only the course were not quite so long and something softer.

“You keep your pecker up, Mr. Dacre,” repeated the good-natured but indiscreet Mr. Welter, who, though

he had a trifle of his own on the race, was moved by Dacre's careworn face. "You keep your pecker up, and in an hour or two you'll be congratulating the trainer of the Leger winner. Ralph winced at the well-meant comfort—changed indeed he must be, when he who had piqued himself on his composure had come to carry his troubles and anxieties so legibly graven on his face. With that tell-tale countenance he dared hardly mingle in the crowd. If he won, and all be well, that alone was sufficient to lose his caste for ever. If he lost—if he lost—why then it did not signify; and when the minutes racked him so horribly, it was urgent he should place himself where he could command the crisis of his fate.

He had stationed himself in the grand stand; an arm passed round one of the supports of the roof, out of the way of the clamour and bustle of the ring below, wedged in by people he knew nothing of. Asgill had made his way to his side, so he had one heart near him—such as it was—that beat in feverish unison with his own. Where his thoughts were, it was hard to tell; assuredly not concentrated on the race, although the sense of an agonizing suspense was heavy on him: but they went fluttering somewhere wildly round it. He was abstracted and yet his senses were nervously acute. Did he catch the name Rocroy, shockingly mangled and mispronounced by many who abused it, his ears were strained on the moment to catch the idle commonplaces that meant less than nothing. Asgill was comparatively composed; but Asgill had had more than one hair-breadth 'scape from ruin in his time, and Asgill only staked money and the illusion of a character, not the respect and love that had grown into his existence,

until they could not be rooted from it without mortal pangs.

The numbers went up! the horses came brushing past the stand in their preliminary canter; a murmur of admiration floats in the drowsy air like the harmonious hum of bees, broken here and there by something like the disgusted buzz of an angry wasp. Whatever opinions before they saw him, there is but a single sentiment now as to the looks and action of Rocroy, and layers begin to wish they had been less pronounced in backing their opinions. Going so lightly within himself, all steel, whipcord and India-rubber, he looks more like staying than pace, and that is saying a good deal. His enemies feel their breath come short; there seems but one thing in the race to touch him,—Telamon, a magnificent chestnut who in bone and shape runs even Rocroy hard. But very different is Telamon's powerful action from the long, easy stride of Rocroy. The French horse, as Welter said, is blessed with the temper of a cherub, while the hot chestnut has flecked his glossy coat with the white foam flakes, is tossing his head all over the place, and to all appearance is trying his best to tear himself out of the straining arms of his jockey.

A couple of false starts; all in Rocroy's favour. Twice has Telamon fiercely cut out the running for a quarter of a mile, before his rider got him back in hand. At last a shout proclaims them off—Telamon making the pace tremendous, for his jockey is sitting for the moment helpless—the rest of them well together; Rocroy ridden discreetly, and going, like greased machinery, well away from the ruck. Then the edge rubs off Telamon's temper, or his rider asserts his mastery, and Asgill and Dacre look a good deal graver.

Then as the hill is risen, the ruck draws out like a toasting-fork, and well to the front Dacre sees the black and scarlet of the stable, stealing up by the rails, and drawing onwards to the girths of the formidable Telamon. Now they sweep round the corner and are coming fast up the straight, Rocroy showing to the front, his jockey's hands well down, holding hard; while—yes—the experienced artist who steers Telamon is riding already. And there is nothing else anywhere in the race.

Asgill dropped his glasses to seize Dacre's hand in both his own, and wring it madly.

"I give you joy, old fellow, we're both of us made men again, and hang me if I'm not better pleased for your sake than mine." And in the exuberance, open-heartedness of his luck, Asgill really meant what he said.

Ralph drew a breath so long that it well nigh choked him, and his heart ached nearly to breaking, while his chest heaved almost to cracking. Such a load had been heaved from his spirits of a sudden, and shouts rent the air of "Rocroy wins;" and nobody noticed Ralph or his friend, for all the eyes were centred on the finish.

Hah! what is that? of a sudden the note is changed, and the devil is kicking his heels again in Ralph Dacre's new-planned paradise. "Telamon wins, Telamon wins by——," begins to be pealed around them. Asgill threw himself forward on the shoulders of the man before him. Ralph once more clung to his post.

His sides scored with the spurs, his flanks wealed with the whip, Telamon, with scarcely a pennyweight of go left in him, is shooting somehow past the judge's chair. Rocroy, dead lame in the near foreleg, is

gallantly struggling out a dead heat for the second place, and Ralph Dacre is craning drearily over the brink of the bottomless pit, whose depths he dimly scans through the mist that gathers round his eyes.

CHAPTER XX.

BOURKE AND ALICE LOSE WITH RALPH ON THE LEGER.

IT was a black Monday to many a man, that settling day after the race and before the wedding; to no one blacker than Mr. Hedger. He had lost largely on behalf of Mr. Dacre, trusting for being recouped to the unimpeachable honour and credit of that wealthy gentleman, and Mr. Dacre was nowhere to be found. Accident that might have been had he only speculated through Hedger, but he had betted freely on his own account. Could he possibly be a defaulter. It looked unpleasantly like it at least, but although the better-informed talked doubtfully of Mr. Dacre's losses by the Metropolitan and Oriental, Mr. Dacre's reputation for riches was too solidly established to be lightly shaken. Besides, men in society remembered that the morrow was his sister's wedding-day—his sister the great heiress; recollected, too, that he was a doating brother, and charitably suggested he might have forgotten all about the settling.

"Bless you, my dear fellow, don't fret yourself," said one; "Dacre hasn't got to pick up his living on the turf like you and me. With him it's only a question of drawing a cheque, and when you get into the habit of

that sort of thing, I fancy its astonishing how easily you defer it."

It appeared on inquiry at Berkeley Square that Mr. Dacre had packed a portmanteau and left town a couple of days before, leaving his valet behind, and saying nothing more of his destination than that if he should not return by the Monday following his letters were to be sent to Barham.

Hedger, who had spared the time to dash off to Berkeley Square in a hansom at immense personal inconvenience, groaned, raised his hat and mopped his forehead. He did not give Ralph up as yet, but he risked too much by him not to be in mortal torture.

Roper, for it was he whom the commissioner interviewed, began to look uneasy too, when he had that inkling of the business of the other, which Hedger was in no mood to deny him. For long, as we know, he had had his own suspicions about his master—suspicions which had been strengthening steadily. He had received him on his return from Doncaster; had been dismissed with irritable abruptness, and was not likely to forget the face he had had a glimpse of. He had spied his master through his brief stay in town; had paid a valet's attention to the ill-brushed hair and the tumbled linen; and when he placed him in a cab for the country, had been much inclined to condole with the party at Barham on this latest addition to their merry circle. Now as he put that and that together his features fell and fixed themselves and struck a new chill to the anxious heart of his questioner.

"So help me, I knew it," gasped Hedger. "There's no trusting any of them, and the sharpest of us is a baby in arms when it comes to telling gold from Brummagem. If a man don't show on a Monday—I

don't care if he were the Archbishop of Canterbury—you may take your oath there's a screw loose somewhere, and if he's gone anywhere he's away to the Levant."

But there was nothing more to be learned of Roper, and to Hedger minutes were hours. He obtained Mr. Dacre's presumed address, dashed round to the nearest office and despatched a telegram to Barham.

The arrival of that telegram would have created a greater stir had it not been for a note that had come from Ralph only the day before. In it he explained that it was just possible he might be detained in town until the morning of the wedding; that in case of accidents he had taken the precaution of signing the settlements at the lawyer's; but that happen what might he would be at Barham to give away the bride. It might have been the lingering tenacity with which the shipwrecked wretch clings to his last chance of life as lashed to his spar in the waste of ocean, he sees the hurricane blow up that would sink a frigate. It might have been partly the artistic instinct of hypocrisy that struggles after homogeneous completeness in the grand epic of a life's deceit. It had become his habit, alas! to hope and to lie, and hope and lie he would and did to the last.

So, on the arrival of the telegram, there was less demonstrative sensation than might have been imagined, but none the less did it cast individual gloom, uneasiness, or consternation on the various members of the party. No one of them dared to put thought in words. Yet every one of them, except perhaps straightforward Mr. Boycott, had more than a foreboding of disaster. Ralph's conduct had of late been so eccentric, to say the least of it, and a man cannot walk for a lifetime, turning up the crooked furrows of guile, without letting some seeds of distrust slip through his fingers. They

may lie barren for long, but there they are all ready for the forcing when occasion comes. Bourke, never too credulous of his fellow-creatures, revived the memories of the times that preceded Lady Dacre's death. Rufford thought of the days when he won his wife; Edith well remembered the love-passages that had so nearly changed the whole tenor of her existence.

As for Alice, all the illusions vanished that had lulled her mind since the day when, with her arms locked round her brother's neck, her heart had told her she was wrestling with him for his salvation. The sadness that had warped his looks, disturbed his expression, and soured his being, burned into her brain, and she was haunted with the idea of an absent agony she had no power to soothe, with the sense of some crushing misery she was utterly powerless to avert. Yet, less than any of them dared she speak her thoughts; not even in Philip's ear could she breathe her sorrows in more than the vaguest whispers.

The Squire and the Ruffords had been hospitably urgent the wedding should be from Barham Hall. Alice had infinitely preferred the quiet of the country church to being paraded before the gaping galleryfuls of St. James's, Piccadilly. Philip Bourke, like most men, sensible or the reverse, had an intense repugnance to being led in heathen fashion a decked victim to the altar, to shouts of *io triumphe* by a feather-brained mob who had no concern whatever with his matters. What was more surprising, Alice, although a very pretty girl with a happy taste in the dress her figure set off so becomingly, gave in with the best of grace and without the least *arrière pensée* in the world, when he suggested the circle of spectators should be narrowed to the uttermost; in other words, that the wedding should be

strictly private. Villagers there would be of course, and for making them a Kentish holiday the happy pair must consent to sacrifice themselves. But there were few guests quartered in the hall, and only one or two brother officers of Bourke's were billeted upon old Mr. Rufford at the Rectory. The fair Madame de Chaillot had eclipsed herself. Like Ralph Dacre, she not unfrequently had urgent private affairs, although she had vouchsafed no confidence even to her father as to the business that so pressingly called her to Paris.

Still there were people there, comparative strangers, whose presence became a terrible embarrassment. They had heard whispers of the telegram, and were far from satisfied by what they vaguely learned of the contents of the letter. The wedding was for noon on Tuesday; the late dinner-hour had arrived on Monday and no signs of the bride's brother. The dinner was a dismal one, as need be. It was clear tongues were tied by a certain restraint, and spirits weighed down by a certain depression.

"Something amiss about Ralph Dacre, you may depend, my dear," Colonel Carter, a cousin of the late Sir Wyndham, remarked to his wife in the privacy of their chamber when the party had broken up early. "There always was something odd about him; he was just one of those fellows that you never get at the bottom of." And the Colonel was certainly not the sort of man Ralph would have bared his soul to, even had he been less reserved, although it would never have occurred to him to stand in special awe of his penetration. The Colonel's lady, who had been busily pumping Mrs. Rufford with no better result than having her suspicions strengthened, could cast no light on the matter. But she lay long awake, after late sleep had overcome her

spouse, searching vainly for the solution of the problem that puzzled her.

"Deuced lucky fellow, Bourke," remarked Captain Lazarus, of the —th, half enviously to his friend and brother officer, Major Markham, as, cigars in mouths, they strolled through the hall shrubberies in the direction of their beds at the Rectory. "Deuced lucky fellow; if there was a flying shower of five-pound notes you may depend upon it he'd be in the way to catch it."

"And forgotten his umbrella at home," assented the senior. "Well, he has had the devil's own luck, Lazarus, and yet I don't know. There are slips between the cup and the lip, my boy, and I hope to goodness Philip may not find that out to-morrow morning. It's plain enough there's something up, and the bride's bothered especially. I sat next her at dinner and I ought to know; only cross-purposes isn't a game I care for, and I gave up trying conversation somewhere about the entrées. I tell you what it is, Lazarus, I don't want to croak, yet I wouldn't mind taking long odds there's no wedding to-morrow."

Lazarus stuck his cigar in his mouth and began fumbling with some excitement in his coat pocket.

"No, no, Lazarus, you needn't bring out your book. In the first place, I've a scruple about betting against a friend's good luck; in the second, excuse me, but I like to know more, perhaps I should say less, of the man I take the long odds from."

Lazarus paused, laughed, and changed the subject. Next morning when he emerged on the gravel before breakfast he found Markham in the closest confab with another gentleman.

"What, Macdonald, you here! and how on earth

have you missed your way? This isn't the Hall, man, though you might think so if you were to see the stables; it's only the Rectory."

The new comer merely nodded to his friend without his features breaking into the faintest shadow of a smile. Markham looked even graver.

"Why, what the mischief is the matter?" proceeded Lazarus. "You've come to be best man at a wedding, Macdonald, not chief mute at a funeral. The one ceremony's a trifle duller than the other; still you knew what you had to expect, and——. But what is the matter? You don't really mean you would have won the long odds, Markham?"

"It looks confoundedly like it, Lazarus," said Markham; "and if the news Macdonald has brought be true, I'm very sorry for Philip Bourke, and as sorry or more so for that jolly girl who took it into her pretty head to marry him. Odds indeed,—I wish for their sake no one else had been taking odds or laying them."

"What? you don't mean——?"

"I do, indeed," chimed in Macdonald, answering Lazarus's look. "This Mr. Dacre, it seems, has gone a mucker on the Sillenger, landed on his hands and knees; taken a header into the Levant, and vanished from respectable society."

"Nonsense, man: it can't be. He's just as rich as—as—I am not. Got places in England, and Germany, and heaven knows where. Besides, he never was on the turf that I heard of, and heard of him I must, if he ever did enough to hurt a man like him."

"It's no use whatever talking, and we're only losing precious time. Dacre's a defaulter, or all the world's a liar. One heard nothing else last night at the Rag. Barker, who never speaks without book, or says

more than he's sure of, ran over the names of half a dozen men he had let in personally. And Hedger, the leviathan, is over head and ears for him. There are all sorts of stories about some city bank he was chairman of, that smashed up the other day. I don't say how much of that is truth, and what scandal. City matters are not much in my line; but I'm greatly afraid there can be no manner of doubt it's a bad business."

"Well, good or bad, Bourke had better be told at once, that's certain. It's a bore to marry such a brother, even when you take a sister like Miss Dacre. Whew —by the way, I trust if Dacre is gone to the dogs, he has not carried his sister's fortune with him; I think I heard Bourke say he managed everything."

"And what wiseacre arranged to lock a dog up in the larder without even a muzzle on? Well, it's no use talking as Macdonald said, but I think I begin to see my way a bit, and if it be as I fancy, I wish Bourke well over the examination of his brother-in-laws accounts."

Bourke's three friends might have proved Job's comforters, had they broken him the evil news in the tone and terms in which they canvassed them among themselves. But they understood one another, and each knew the other's language to be merely a conventional veil flung over feelings of real concern and sympathy. Macdonald charged himself with the unpleasant communication; Markham accompanying him to pass him quietly into the house, and facilitate the delicate performance of his mission.

There was little difficulty about that part of it. Uneasiness had grown with Dacre's non-appearance. Every one's face seemed to presage misfortune, and no one would have been much surprised at anything.

Colonel Carter had had London letters that morning, whose contents he had imparted to his wife, and that lady had sat brooding with such gloomy importance over the possession of a clue to the mystery, that her very aspect set Mrs. Rufford's nerves a quivering, and stuffed the bridegroom's chair cushion with thorns. Philip too in his heart had given up his future brother-in-law, but he could not make out why his friend Macdonald did not put in an appearance. Then in answer to repeated inquiries, he learned that that gentleman had driven to the Rectory, and he became persuaded some great mishap had occurred, and that his friend knew it. How glad he was that Alice kept her room. But for himself it was positive relief, when, rising from the breakfast-table, he was button-holed by Markham and let off to the library to Macdonald.

Markham left the pair together, and before the door had closed on him, Bourke had appealed to his friend to learn the worst.

"Well, what is it, George? Out with it at once, for heaven's sake, and have it over. What has happened to Dacre?"

And after some little beating about the bush, which Bourke cut short, Macdonald said what he had come to say; briefly and plainly, although this time no man could have complained of levity in his manner.

"Such is the story," he concluded; but after all, I need hardly say it wants confirmation: not that I pretend to doubt it so far as it goes. Dacre certainly did not show yesterday, but then there are a dozen ways of accounting for his non-appearance. He may have met with an accident; come to grief somewhere or other."

"If I could only persuade his sister to think so.

Pleasant news to break to my bride, George, when the most consolatory explanation I can offer her is, that some terrible accident has overtaken her only brother."

The cup and the lip indeed! How Bourke had looked forward to the day, which he had fondly hoped should be as happy a one for Alice as for himself. He would have almost sacrificed a year of his wedded happiness,—of the wedded happiness that looked the more heavenly to him, now that it seemed dissipating in the fingers that had nearly clutched it—to have delegated any one else as the bearer of these evil tidings. His uncle—Mrs. Rufford— But no, to all intents and purposes, he was Alice Dacre's husband; he must pay the heavy penalties of the position as he would have claimed its blessed privileges. Perhaps there was a trace of selfishness in the thought, that he would assert his rights when they seemed endangered. But to do him justice, the thought of the suffering in store for her swallowed all sense of his personal disappointments. As for the havoc his vanished brother-in-law might have made with the fortune he had had in charge, Bourke hardly gave a thought to that. And he mounted to Mrs. Rufford's boudoir when he had requested an interview with his bride, with braced nerves and set teeth, beating pulses and throbbing heart, as he might have scaled a breach at the head of a forlorn hope, in a post he would not for his life have resigned to another. He could not guess how it might move her, but no eyes but his should witness her agony of grief and shame.

It was relief in a measure, to find that with Alice the first bitterness of the shock was over. True, her lips strove to find for her brother's absence the reasons

her sense belied. Except on confirmation strong as proof of holy writ, she would not renounce in words her faith in him she had believed so blindly. But her conscience would condemn him in spite of her, although her heart laboured with loving ingenuity to search out extenuating circumstances. The sacred ties that bound him to her were strained, not snapped,—the love remained, although the joy was turned to mourning, and the pride to pity. Since she had spoken last with Ralph, it had been borne in on her more and more, that something like remorse was weighing heavy on him, that sorrows he could not shake off and dare not speak of, had set their fangs in his flesh. And now if he had really been unfortunate,—alone with herself, even she could not listen to the whispered “guilty,”—if he had really been unfortunate, it seemed relatively but a light thing, that all the world should know it. If shame there was, the shame was not in the scandal.

It was relief at first to see that the first bitterness was over, and that she received his news far more calmly than he had expected. But not afterwards. He was more touched by her silent sorrow, than he would have been scared by its most frantic outbreak. With it all he felt a jealousy of her wretched brother, and an indignation against him where detestation largely mingled. It was not only that Ralph had wantonly wrought all this misery; that he had come between them with a dramatic refinement of malignity, on the very day that was to crown their loves. But he was between them still, when Alice’s heart should have come out to her lover’s, in the moment when her lover should have been gathering the first fruits of the union of their souls. Alice sat tearlessly by the fallen idol

she used to worship, and denied him the right to comfort her, because she would not admit the evidence that told her it had fallen.

But time passed; their wedding was to have been at noon; the eleventh hour was literally on the point of sounding, and the ceremony must be postponed. The merry peals had been ringing out that morning. The approach from the Hall and the access to the church had been spanned with the mockery of triumphal arches. The roses had been gathered that were to be strewed along their path, and the village maidens who were to strew them were already decking themselves in their best attire. The bitter pill had to be swallowed in public, and it was for him to see that it should be done at once.

It occurred to him for a moment, that the wisest thing to be done, might be to defy the scandal—was it not on the cards that it might prove to be no scandal at all?—and force forward the wedding at all sacrifices of feeling. Sacrifices of feeling,—how lightly his heart bounded to the idea! No, wise or otherwise, he could not whisper the suggestion. He might as well have urged Alice to wed him across the body of her brother. The least said the better; a parting caress, and for the time he would be gone. He took her in his arms and strained her to his breast. And Alice's mute answer as she clasped him back again and turned her pale lips to his, poured a flood of balm on his fevered spirit. For the sister's sake, he almost felt in charity with the brother. For the first time he really knew how much she was his, and for the sake of the knowledge he was almost resigned to bear his disappointment.

CHAPTER XXI.

RALPH "SETTLES" WITH ASGILL AND ALICE.

THE rush that cleared the stand as the mob swept down to struggle for a glimpse at the winner, nearly carried Ralph off his legs. He was borne away from his pillar to be brought up against the next one, and round that he flung his arm instinctively, and clung tenaciously. His race-glasses had slipped through his nerveless fingers, and he never missed them as they fell and smashed at his feet. The tide of boisterous humanity ebbed from around him, and left him stranded and solitary, emblematic of his future fate. The world he had sold his soul for was for him no more; in the future his blighted life must be as lonely as if he had been cast away upon a coral reef in mid-ocean. Only a single fellow-creature was left near him, ghastly landmark of the point he had drifted from, stinging memory of the pleasant past that had been his. Asgill was there, with eyes on his, wrecked like Ralph, but cherishing, perhaps, the lingering hope that the spar that had saved him before might even yet float him to safety. Asgill's brain was reeling still from alternate buffetings between hope and despair, but he was more casehardened from the hammerings of hostile fortune, and then he had lost less. He was ruined, but that was all, and ruin he had long learned to contemplate. His bark had shattered at last on the rock towards which the current had been drifting him for years. Ralph was ruined, and far

worse—finally driven from the place of hope and the paradise of affections, where his tainted spirit had been suffered to linger, so long as repentance was yet open to him. The accents of his sister's pleading voice were still ringing in his ears. Had he only listened to it! He lifted his eyes, and they encountered those of Asgill's—of Asgill who had crawled up like the serpent, and lured him away beyond those blessed gates that had closed behind him irretrievably. How little money and position seemed to him at that moment. Too late. At last his eyes were opened, and he loathed the filthy dross for which he had lived and lost himself. If he could only replace himself, as he might have been three days before, a heart-touched penitent at the feet of the comforting angel, who would have asked no better than to be his better Providence, could he be again a suppliant for the silence she would have given unasked; for a few of those wretched thousands she set so little store by, even before he had poisoned them to her.

Then it flashed to his mind, the unspeakable, irretrievable wrong he had done her in not humbling himself before her while it was time, and accepting her absolution and her bounty. At the moment, he loathed himself and his own unavailing remorse. That he saw so clearly at last was only because he was utterly lost to the world he had lived in: that he could feel so keenly for his sister, was merely because he had parted with every hope for himself. Evil as his conduct had been, perhaps he did himself some injustice in his present self-unforgiving mood. He had always loved his sister, even when he wronged her, and he had considered her next to himself, sometimes as much as himself. But his mind was so bitterly occupied with

the wrongs he had done her, that it could hardly harbour less absorbing resentments. The fierce glance he had turned on Asgill faded out in melancholy, although still his eyes mechanically rested on the face of his quondam ally.

That first look had paralyzed Asgill where he stood. He was like the traveller who emerges in the jungle within easy spring of the crouching cougar. He dared hardly draw the breath that might break the charm of the surprise: dared not, by the semblance of a motion, precipitate the moment that might see him torn limb from limb. A strange position: the turmoil of noisy, laughing life a few feet below him, the shouts of the ring and the trivial "chaffing" of its *rascaille*; while above was an over-mastering passion that had slipped its collar, barring the path that would have led him to save himself in the crowd.

Intense, then, was his relief when he saw the passion calm itself down. The pleasure of the reaction from the imminent danger made him almost forget the loss he shared with Dacre—almost, but not altogether. In his astute prudence he thought he might as well smooth the way to his retreat, and so he put out a timid hand to stroke the beast that threatened him. He did the best for himself according to his lights, and decided he might act more safely in helping his ally back to hope.

"That's right, Dacre," he said, in answer to the change of look, "never say die, old fellow! No human power could have foreseen such a diabolical turn of luck as this—a horse walking away with the race like an American trotter with a pony - phaeton, and then breaking down, just as he was on the very point of landing it. What then? Men have been as hard hit before, and only been winged, not killed. If you can't

pay yourself you can always borrow and get breathing-time, and remember, if you're hard up for money, you have a sister who is not, and as your luck would have it, she's her own mistress still. Miss Dacre——"

Encouraged by Dacre's silence, and the general listlessness of his bearing—he was not listening in truth,—Asgill got volubly eloquent as he edged himself towards the trap-door that tempted him with the hope of egress, and in which he proposed to conclude his speech. And he might have succeeded, too, but unluckily for him, as he imprudently tampered with Miss Dacre's name, he landed conveniently within reach of her brother's arm, and by some instantaneous process the name of a sudden fixed upon Dacre's mental retina the meaning of all this language that had been filtering through his heedless ears. And of a sudden, Asgill stood condemned in Dacre's jaundiced eyes, caught, red hand, renewing the very temptations that had driven him to utter ruin, that had made his sister miserable just as she should have been most happy. All the offender's former sins came rushing up in a driving blast that fanned Dacre's smouldering fury to a blaze. He "saw red," and Asgill was like the wretch who catches the first instantaneous flicker of lurid light as the spark lights on the powder-cask. He had barely time to feel a chill shoot to his marrow as he read off in Dacre's face the storm-signals that had heralded that attempted assault on him in his room; only in this case the symptoms were a hundred times more malignant. This time the storm blew up simultaneously with its forerunners, and he had neither time to think nor turn before the other threw himself on him. A milder man might have felt furiously revengeful in the circumstances, and now that the wild beast lurking in

Dacre's inner nature was unchained from the *convenances*, and hounded forward by despair, there was small hope that thought or pity would choke him off before it was too late for Asgill.

The choking was to be all the other way. Ralph had one hand twisting itself in his victim's necktie; lucky for Asgill that the voluminous cravat and the massive racing pin he wore as a sporting-man, declined to lend themselves very pliantly to the garotte. Luckier still that he had thrown up his right arm with vigour enough to give Dacre a second or two's work in mastering it. The profitable employment of seconds may be worth decades of years in this life, as they may be fearfully pregnant with one's fate through endless ages in eternity. And it was a full second or two before Asgill settled back uncomfortably across the bench; the black face and the veins swelling like poor Rocroy's foundered sinews; the eyes that had prided themselves on their steely impassiveness, starting from their sockets, till the terror and horror in them became almost stilled. Ralph Dacre never saw them. They were Alice's eyes in their reproachful, grief-stricken tenderness that replaced those fierce-rolling eyeballs. Another moment, and the maddening thought of her would have revenged the wrongs it set the finishing-stroke to, by making a murderer of her brother, when a heavy blow fell sharp across his arms. Needs must; for the moment his muscles were paralyzed, and his fingers released their clutch upon the throat of his prostrate enemy. Dacre turned furiously on his assailant, to confront a burly sergeant of the police.

"Come, stow all that," exclaimed this muscular mediator, in reply to an impotent gesture of fury. "You just keep quiet, my friend, or you'll find it a

good deal the worse for you. Yes, when you've taken time and temper to think it quietly over, you'll acknowledge me to be the best friend you ever had in your life; leastwise if you've any prejudice in regard to dying in your bed instead of in the air. Why, God bless me! Beg pardon, sir, but I do believe it's Mr. Dacre, though I would never have known you. Oh, yes, sir, I remember you well. I was on duty at that Bank of yours, the day the Fenian sympathizers had their happy-go-lucky through the city. You had me up in your room before and after. No offence, sir, but I'm sorry to see you in such a way; fear you must have been hit a good deal worse nor ordinary. Well, all's well that ends well, and it's fortunate so far that the gentleman there don't seem very much the worse. I'll, go bail, though, he's as little the better. It was all a private matter, perhaps, and I dare say he won't think it necessary to give you in charge. If he don't, and if I were you, Mr. Dacre, I'd be out of this at once. Some of the people well out there on the course may have seen something of the scrimmage from a distance, and be keen to see what's up."

While speaking, the policeman had been helping Asgill into a sitting posture, loosing his choking necktie, and generally making things more comfortable for him. And already he had his partial consciousness again. He had been hurried towards death at an ugly pace; fortunately the policeman had interfered before he had finished the journey.

Dacre scarcely dared or deigned to look at him. He was swallowing down fresh draughts from the brimming cup of his humiliation. After having just attempted his enemy's life, he was forced to wait and even long for a favour at his hands. To be brought

before the magistrates for an attempt to murder, while all the world was talking of the grand defaulter! To be laid by the legs, when his only thought was to remain the unfettered master of his movements, and disappear out of the way of inevitable disclosures. To be chained to the stake in the grim solitude of a police cell with his own thoughts to visit him, and the terror of an angel-visit from Alice impending over his head! Horror heaped on horror, shame on shame, and misery on misery. Oh, that Asgill would speak and be merciful; as for him, even the load of forebodings that weighed upon him could not stoop him to ask for mercy.

Meanwhile, Asgill busied himself in collecting his confused thoughts, and he looked at Dacre out of his bloodshot eyes with a sullen timidity. Confused as his thoughts were, the habit of swift decision in circumstances of the sort was strong with him, and he did not dally long with his decision. It would be impossible to analyze his motives; they were too inextricably blended. Partly the feeling that it was nearly as little pleasant for him as Dacre to be dragged conspicuously before the public in his circumstances; partly the bodily terror that Dacre's brute violence had imposed, the anxiety to deprecate future danger from an enemy who had such fits of fierceness. And perhaps, not the least did he take this uncontrollable violence from a man he had known so self-restrained, as the measure of the terrible wrongs he had done him, and recognize that he could afford to forgive a little when he had so very much to be forgiven.

"I make no charge, policeman, none whatever," he panted out, scowling diabolically: "it was all a misunderstanding between my—friend and me."

"Then, my good sir, if you allow me to escort one of you two gentlemen downstairs, my duty ends there, and very glad of it I am."

"Don't be afraid, sergeant," said Dacre. "I shall go quietly to town at once. I have nothing to detain me here—nothing in the world."

"No, thank you, sir; no, really. Well, if you will insist upon it—" And the sergeant pocketed with faint protest the gold which Ralph impatiently forced on him. "Not the only money he's left here to-day, by long chalks, poor gentleman, I'll pound it," exclaimed the worthy officer, half as a hint to Asgill, whom he suspected of being an enormous winner, and perhaps hoped might prove profusely liberal. But Asgill being ruined in his degree, and by no means quite so desperate as Dacre, was in proportionately parsimonious mood. No wonder. Had Dacre not been there, a living finger-post to point him the way to lower depths of wretchedness than even he was travelling towards, Asgill might have pronounced himself very sufficiently beggared.

Ralph Dacre made his way to town. With creditable calm he threaded countless interruptions. How he did it he would have been puzzled to say, but great is habit, and it will prevail. We train ourselves to sustained hypocrisy from our cradle, until the matured vigour of our deceit finds itself equal to the most terrible passing strain.

"Hah, Dacre, going back like me with your tail between your legs. You were as sweet on Rocroy, were you not, as I on Bushranger? Never mind, it will be all the same half-a-dozen years hence. If we hadn't shied it away on the Sellinger, you may take your oath we should have made ducks and drakes of the money somewhere else."

“Gad, Master Shallow, you owe me a thousand pounds. It was a great bit of luck my running up against you this morning, just when I wanted to lay against that French horse of yours.”

“Hang it, my dear Dacre, you look as if something had disagreed with you. Was it the lobster salad, or the champagne, or Telamon?—Telamon, I suspect, eh?” This last from a gentleman who had had more than enough of champagne, good or bad, than was good for him—and through such a running fire the sorrow-stricken wretch had to struggle his way across the course.

Yet he gave none of his luncheon-flushed interlocutors occasion to say more than that if men will get up on the wrong horse, they must expect to pull long faces. But if he had the nerve to give and bear the passing touches on his raw, he shrank from the chance of finding a Spanish-fly blister clapped upon it, as the express train travelled townwards. He looked round to see himself unobserved, then plunged in to ensconce himself in the corner of a second-class carriage. Speedily it was filled with touts, legs, well-to-do roughs, and sporting licensed victuallers, redolent of fragrant gin and rancid tobacco. They filled the compartment with dense clouds of smoke, through which the flasks and flat stone-bottles went their eccentric orbits, like fiery-bellied comets. The owners pressed their coarse hospitality on Ralph, but soon they left him to himself. He had to keep up no appearance with them—had never seen them before—would never meet them again. As, flask and cigar-case in hand, they threw themselves up against the barriers of his first civil refusal, he motioned them away with the ugly looks of the wolf, who shows his teeth when he opens his lips, and is apt to snap before he snarls. The death's-head in the corner did not damp their

orgy, or dash their obstreperous mirth, but at least the sense that it was uncanny made them give it a reasonably wide berth.

We know the nature of Roper's surmises about his master, when the distrustful retainer welcomed the unlucky backer of Rocroy to the pleasant home he was looking his last on. Eyes more careless and less intelligent might have guessed there was something much amiss. Ralph rose on the following morning to work out the grinding duties of a busy day, by machinery wound by violent effort to high-pressure pitch. He strenuously diverted eyes and thoughts from the personal future that brooded so heavy on him, as he set himself to redress to the utmost the pecuniary wrongs he had done his sister. At least she should know the worst of him at once, and before he vanished from her for ever, he should leave her the long-delayed confession of his dealings with her pounds, shillings, and pence. The hopes of handing her over her fortune unimpaired had been too constantly present with him: he had followed too hungrily each wearing fluctuation of the share-markets, each separate transaction of his brokers, to have much difficulty about the actual balance-sheet. He knew what had been realized—how the rest might realize he could not say. But he might reckon roughly, and the unavoidable deficiency must be from L.35,000 to L.45,000. How small a sum comparatively to have accepted from his sister. Had he only braced his courage to tell her the terrible truth she must learn at last in common with the rest of the world. If it had not been for his present debts—no heavy ones—and those other debts of honour this fatal race had charged him with——.

Strange he should never reflect on the boon he

might yet confer on her, on the kindness he might do her husband, were he even yet to make full and free avowal. He might have guessed, from the way his own pride was stung, demoralized and self-broken to vice and meanness as he was, how willingly they would have paid, even for their own sakes, a ransom price for his reputation. That never occurred to him—at least not, as usual, till later, and then it was again too late. At present his morbid thought was to save each shilling he could to his sister. He devoted the best of the day to collecting the scattered vouchers of her securities; the money that stood at his bankers' account he transferred to hers; he enclosed a careful account of his recent intrusions in a dry note to his lawyers, curtly calling attention to the deficiency, without comment. Then he posted it so that it should only reach them on the following Monday. He stuffed a portmanteau with his most serviceable clothes, left behind him his plate, the family jewels, and all his valuables, cashed a cheque for 100*l.*, and wrote a note to Martin Hardcastle, carrying away with him a revolver of that gentleman's that happened to be lying in Berkeley Square. And that evening, a little before midnight, he embarked in the South-Eastern Company's tidal boat for Ostend.

CHAPTER XXII.

HIS SISTER'S WEDDING DAY.

DACRE had written his letter to Martin Hardcastle in England. He was determined, while his hand was in and his resolution screwed to the mark, to go

through with all that wretched business of the last will and testament of Ralph Dacre, the nominally respectable man. But having laid the train to the mine that was to blow himself and his sister's happiness sky-high, he deferred the firing it from a variety of motives. Not the least of these was the idea of leaving Alice a few hours more of comparative enjoyment of her future; of letting her lingering faith in him survive until inevitable circumstances should sound its knell. Selfishness was speaking still. If he had thought more of her and nothing of himself, he would have spared her the dramatic catastrophe of a wedding shamefully *manqué*, when the bidden guests were gathered round the priests standing at the altar. So he posted the letter in Brussels, that it might reach Hardcastle at his rooms in town on the wedding morning. He happened to know that Hardcastle had declined the Squire's invitation to sleep at the Hall, and had arranged to arrive there on the morning of the ceremony. But chance spared Hardcastle the mission of bearing to Alice the evil tidings that would have let her know the worst on the best authority. On the afternoon of the Monday a friend, meeting him at the club and learning his plans for the morrow, had pressed him for a mess dinner at Chatham, and offered him a billet for the night. So Martin had reached Barham on the Tuesday no wiser than the rest of the world, although greatly more anxious. For the ill news of the reputed defalcation of Phil Bourke's brother-in-law had travelled down to St. Mary Barracks, and in his heart and conscience Hardcastle found too plausible explanations of it not to send him to the Hall with the most melancholy forebodings. His heart and conscience and those half-confidences he had from time to time received or

surprised from Ralph made such a coward of him that he dared not face Alice, and was utterly ill at ease with every one else. He would have collapsed fatally under cross-examination, so he listened to the whisper of selfish prudence, made a precipitate start from Barham, and slunk back to town. He drove to his lodgings to strip the garments of gladness he wore with so sad a heart, and stood staring at the letter lying on his table.

Strong as his nerves were, his hand trembled and his heart bumped as he took it up. He knew it must contain the very worst: his forebodings read it for him through the envelope. He liked Ralph, and he would have grieved for him. Yet grief was swallowed in anger as he thought of Alice—of Alice innocent and the double victim of the man who had wronged her; Alice half broken-hearted, bearing her brother's punishment and smarting for his sin. And then for himself—why, in the name of all the fiends, should his hand be selected to deal her the fatal blow?

“By all things holy, Ralph Dacre, you’ve done me more than one good turn in your day; but neither you nor any living man had a right to send me on a service like this. I don’t wonder you shrunk from seeing your sister shrivel up as you told her; but if the thing had to be told at all, there was no man but you to tell it. Well, if I must, I must. I never gave any one the right to say there was the thing on earth I feared, and I’m surely not turning tender in my old age. Besides, surely she knows I can’t mean to hurt her; that I’d bear her pain ten times told if I could, and, after all, it’s rough work at best, and it matters little who breaks it. What’s got to be done had better be done quickly; and, talking of that, I had best read the letter.”

He stared from his soliloquy and the chair he had tumbled into, tore the envelope open, and ran his eyes down the lines.

"I know, Hardcastle, I have no right to appeal to the past I have chosen to break with, or to ask anything of the friendship I have disgraced and renounced; and yet one last great service I ask of your friendship for me as you may once have fancied me, counting absolutely on your regard for my sister and your courage. Go and tell her that the brother whom for years she believed worthy of her and something more, has lived a lying hypocrite till he was exposed as a swindling scoundrel. I have tampered systematically with the property her dying mother left me as a sacred trust; how far I have robbed her she will learn from her lawyers. I have publicly advertised the dishonour of her name by betting recklessly when I had not a shilling but hers to pay with. Far worse than all, I have done my best to abuse her trusting confidence in all that is good and honourable, and my remorse would be deeper did I not believe in her as firmly as she used to believe in me. The best atonement I could make would be to take care she never heard of me again, and yet once again she must hear of me; I cannot spare her if I am to do her common justice. Before I die to the world I have disgraced I shall execute a final settlement of my affairs and transfer to her the properties which have proved such curses to me. Whether she choose to sell them or apply her fortune to clearing their encumbrances, the material wrongs I have done her will be in a measure repaired. God knows what I would give to do as much towards redeeming the moral ones. My personal liabilities are small: I robbed too regularly to run long scores. As

for my debts of 'honour,' I know her too well not to be sure they will be provided for—it is no use remonstrating—and in the heavy account I have run with her trifles like these go for nothing. Even she can hardly think more lightly of money than I do now it is too late. I should have asked her to clear me while yet there was time to save our name, but I was a coward then as always. God grant that Bourke may prove to her all I might have been. Sometimes in my misery I fancy that there I may have done her one injury the more, and that my conduct may have robbed her of a lover as of other things. But no, that is impossible, and her virtues shield her from the consequences of my vices. No man who had gained her love could part with the hope of calling Alice Dacre his. If I thought her money weighed with him I would do him a mischief yet before closing my accounts with society. I ask a great thing of you, Hardcastle, and add nothing to the bare request—my thanks go for as little as my prayers. “RALPH DACRE.”

“One thing more. I have drawn a hundred pounds to furnish the wings of my flight. Pay the sum to the credit of Alice's bankers and say nothing of my having borrowed it of you. Can you tell why I lay you under contribution to help me?—you, the poorest in point of money of all I have any claim on. I hardly can, and yet the impulse to do it was irresistible. I have carried off that revolver of yours as a keepsake. God knows when and where I may use it, but it will serve me best by not failing me at my need——”

“Poor Dacre!” exclaimed Hardcastle, and he drew the back of his hand across his bushy eyebrows and then frowned at the weakness. “Well, what I have to do must be done quickly for all reasons—done quickly

for my own sake, or I dare not do it at all." He sprang on a Bradshaw, rung to order a hansom, threw off his frock coat and white waistcoat to replace them with clothes less lustrous, thrust Dacre's letter into his pocket, telegraphed for a carriage to be waiting him at Barham station, and, shooting out into the street, just caught the train he aimed at. Philip Bourke was expecting him in a dog-cart from the Hall, yet, hurried as he was, Hardcastle lingered for five minutes at the station. He carefully noted the points of Ralph's letter in a pocket-book, then tore it into the minutest morsels and scattered them away to the winds. Affection and concern suggested a delicate consideration his intimates would scarcely have suspected him of. Her brother's last words, the well-deserved epithets with which Ralph branded his infamy, should never burn into Alice's brain. With clear conscience Hardcastle could lay his hand upon his heart and pledge his honour that the *literæ scriptæ* of self-condemnation were lost beyond recall.

Bourke listened to the story as they drove rapidly towards the Hall. His uncle, Boycott and Rufford were waiting to intercept them in the avenue, out of sight of the windows. The gentleman descended; the dog-cart was sent round by the back way to the stables, Philip whispering an order in the servant's ear.

"So you know all about it, I presume, Hardcastle?" burst out the Squire, making himself spokesman. "Are we to know it too, or are there to be more mysteries; have you anything you wish to keep for Alice's private ear?"

"I bring news, Mr. Boycott, that all the world must know only too soon,—as it fancies it knows them already." In a few blunt words, in dogged fashion, he

repeated the tale that already sickened him in the telling, although he had only told it once.

The Squire groaned—"A nephew of mine! a nephew of mine! But may God forgive me for thinking of myself with his poor sister under my roof, and widowed just as she was being wedded.

Rufford tried to say something in the way of comfort; something commonplace, but seldom had he shown good heart and good nature more than in saying it, for his connection with the defaulter stung him to the quick. Philip Bourke, straining impatiently like a dog in the leash, broke out with the incoherent beginning of a sentence, and then stopped himself short.

"Well, Philip, out with it, man: what were you going to say?" exclaimed the hot old Irishman, his uncle. "God help you, you have a better right to be listened to than any of us."

But Philip was silent still, although his flushing face and troubled eye betrayed the effort that the silence cost him.

"Out with it, man," repeated his uncle, with more impatience than before, although his manner softened. "Out with it, I say. My life upon it, I know what a nephew of mine ought to be after meaning in the circumstances."

Thus adjured, Philip hesitated no longer. "You've told me to consider myself your heir, sir; nay, you've arranged to give me your property in your lifetime. In half an hour there's a train back to town. Let me go by it with carte blanche to settle everything at Tattersall's."

"Of course, my boy; that's the very first thing to be done, and it's for us to do it. I think we've found the most agreeable present for Alice with things hap-

pening as they have. Away with you to the stables, and tell the man to clap the harness on again. I'll be off to my room, and sign the blank cheques you can carry with you."

"I told him not to take out the mare till he had fresh orders; I thought I knew how we should arrange it."

"Right," exclaimed his uncle, approvingly, and brightening up with the bustle of the emergency. "Nothing like military promptitude, Irish impulse, and Bourke presence of mind."

"Stay a moment," said Martin Hardcastle, who could honestly boast a little of that last quality, and who began to see the means of escaping an ordeal he dreaded worse than any battery he had ever faced. "Stay one moment. You might charge me with the cheque-book, and I'll undertake to manage the settling. Miss Dacre must be told of this, and it was that I came for. But surely no one can break things to her like her future husband."

"Hardcastle is right," said Rufford, "and if you will allow me, I'll join him in his mission. All is not quite lost yet. We must cook up some pretext for the disappearance, and if ever hard circumstances commanded a pious fraud, now is the time. The world won't believe our story. But at least we shall reduce it to whispers if not to silence, always something gained. And you may do about the payment as you please, Mr. Bourke. I have no desire to baulk your generosity, but it is better that I or Mr. Boycott—any one rather than you—sign the cheques that must appear in evidence for or against Dacre. Unluckily it will be after bank hours, or we might dispense with cheques altogether."

The Bourkes saw the prudence of the suggestion, and gave in to it. The preliminary business was bustled through, and the commissioners for the settlement of the Leger debt dashed off upon their delicate mission.

If ever in this world sporting gentleman had an agreeable surprise, that gentleman was Mr. Hedger, when they waited upon him. With the philosophy and elasticity of the *élite* of his class, he had already moaned his moan over his serious loss, and gummed down the black pages that had borne the fatal details of it. When he was told he might tear them open again, and cry quits with the client who had bolted so deeply in his debt, he believed himself the victim of a heartless mystification. In the pleasure of discovering it to be a joyful truth, he felt as much in charity with Dacre as if he had been paid his disbursements in advance with compound interest. Only he owed it to his character for shrewdness to show that, though paid and happy, he was not gulled.

“Called off suddenly to the Continent, and struck down with illness before he could come back. Unlucky indeed! Certainly, gentlemen, have it all your own way. If you tell me to give out that he had gone ballooning in the channel, and couldn’t beat back for settling day because of contrary winds, I’m the man that’s game to swear it in all companies.”

And a hint from Rufford to one or two magnates of the Jockey Club, safe discreet men, whom long stable practice had made the best amateurs in England at the art of keeping things dark, helped the currency of the legend that Hedger in sporting circles asseverated to be gospel. Men might mutter “walker,” droop their trembling eyelids, and touch with tip of finger their up-curved nostrils. But an apology and an expression of

regret for its precipitation, replaced the poster that had damned to sporting infamy the absent patron of Rocroy. And as for the city, there things were safe and square. The Metropolitan and Oriental Bank held valid security for any liabilities its late chairman might have left unsettled.

So Bourke could tell the bride, who had slipped for the moment from his arms, that her brothers reputation had been snatched from the fire, although it must carry signs of the singeing. It might be a consolation later perhaps, but scarcely then. There was no blinking the scathing fact that the brother she had loved so fondly and lived so proud of, had all the time been wriggling himself serpent-like in the dust, and there was small comfort in the thought that the world had been in a measure blinded. Shape her thoughts in words, and she would have gone on moaning, "How art thou fallen from heaven, Lucifer, son of the morning." She could hardly trust her thoughts or eyes to plumb the depths of the abyss he had fallen to.

Her lover sat looking on at her anguish with the deeper sympathy in her pains that he felt himself so powerless to assuage them. The blow had fallen, and say what he might, nothing he could say would dull the first smarting of the bruise. The best comfort he could offer would have smacked of selfishness. Luckily for herself, she thought of him, and her thoughts floated round upon the current to which his heart would have diverted them.

"And you, Philip; sorrow is selfish and so is shame, and overmastering my selfishness must be, when it makes me ignore you. A marred wedding day—and a disgraced bride."

"Disgraced bride, Alice—had any one else but said

so! You would never believe me, dearest, if I told you that with such a bride, it did not hit me hard this marring of our wedding day. That love of yours for your brother is the only love I could not be jealous of—"there Bourke hardly spoke the truth, for very sensibly jealous of it he was—"and when I see its depth and its constancy, I marvel more and more at the good fortune that ever gave me so great a share in your heart."

"But think how things have changed with the last few days. Oh, I must think for you, Philip, if you are driven too wildly by passion and generosity to think wisely for yourself. You must not marry a disgraced name in haste, to fret away under the galling thought through a life-time. The day might come when you would drag me about as the shameful brand of the galley slave; hate me as the sign and souvenir of the taint that was burning into your soul."

Philip Bourke's grave face relaxed, and he laughed heartily at the notion. He could afford to laugh, for his penetration was not deceived for a moment. Sad as his mistress was, she was never less serious than in the lamentable picture she conjured up for their warning. Sad as she was, indeed, she could scarcely restrain the flicker of a smile as Philip laughed the fancy down; she felt a comfort she blamed herself for, as the faint glow of gladness that her lover's words woke in the bottom of her heart, showed her hope was alive in her yet, that happiness even was somewhere near to her.

And Philip Bourke with no small self-restraint, and more tact than might have been expected in the wistful, baffled ardour of his state of suspense, cut the conference short, and took himself away to send Edith Rufford to her friend. Took himself away at least,

after one long lingering clinging embrace that went further to comfort and reassure Alice than any words could have done; that consoled him under the postponement of his happiness, as much as consolation was possible in the tantalizing nature of things. One and the other felt they understood each other absolutely; that all hypocrisy and the pretence of playing at generous sacrifices was out of place; that farce became extravaganza, when they talked of regulating their relations by the ideas of the world or its fancies.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE TREASURES OF THE SCALA FELL.

THE winter of Philip Bourke's discontented waiting is over, and, with the full flush of merry spring, those long-deferred hopes of his have burst from bud to bloom. The days of Alice's formal mourning for her departed brother have been accomplished, although the sad memories of him that clung by her have left her graver than before. His sins have raised the restless ghosts of the past. Their dull shadows will fall across her soul in what should be her brightest moments, nor can all her love for her husband, or her husband's devoted love for her, lay them peacefully. But we must take the clouds with the sunshine. On the whole, her happiness is as great as any of us deserves, and far more than falls to the common lot of mortals.

She had announced her inexorable resolution to give a year to her brother before she would listen again to talk of marriage. He was worse than dead—he was

living wretched, or wasting away of slow despair. What did she know of him?—and in the barest decency he demanded as much consideration as that. Then there came the second thoughts that always shook her. She had had a brother once, but she had a lover still. Something she owed to him who offered her all—and his claims were surely at least as strong as the other's. She might have yielded sooner; but her conscience told her how strongly her affections pled in her lover's favour, and she would have blushed to tell how biassed a judge her heart was in the matter. And when Philip's impetuous nature and overflowing love would occasionally burst out in more than passionate remonstrance, he moved her the more that she knew how his delicacy strove to silence him. To be sure, when Philip did keep silence, he knew he had ardent allies enough to trust his cause to. Mr. Boycott spoke with an uncompromising decision very unusual with him towards one he loved like a daughter, and who generally moulded him as she pleased. He told her frankly of her paramount duty to her betrothed husband, and spoke so well and so tellingly that old Bourke, eager on the subject beyond all except his nephew, felt he could do no better than leave the matter in the hands of the Squire. Nor did Hardcastle spare advice—given apologetically, but with the blunt candour of his nature—and his advice weighed the more that he spoke and thought so kindly of the lost one. Then beyond all others there was Edith Rufford, with perpetual access to Alice's ear, speaking or writing with such suasive arguments as only a woman could use, and with a gentle, firm persistence that could not, and would not, be denied. Edith was the more persuasive advocate that she, too, had a lingering, tender memory of those old times when Ralph

had wronged and slighted her, and played fast and loose with the love that was almost his, and might have changed the whole course of his career; although she had known him better, if not longer, than any of them, and knew how tainted he had been at the core, even when he showed to the world the fresh promise of honourable aspiring youth. Yet, persuasive advocate as Edith was, earnest as were the rest of them, Alice, as we have said, was too distrustful of her own feelings to have yielded lightly. The argument that mainly wrought with her—that gave her conscience solid excuse for succumbing, was one that was dictated by shrewd, worldly wisdom. “We have done our best,” her friends said to her, “to save your brother’s reputation, and we have succeeded beyond expectation. Already he seems half forgotten. The world does not know that you are legally the mistress of Allonby and Heppenstall. In common kindness to him, you must not undo our work—and how can you undo it more fatally than by confirming people’s least charitable construction of the scandals that banished him from his country?”

That argument shook her sorely, till it moved her at last; and, once moved, she was wrought into a tremulous fear of anxiety lest, with all her eagerness to right him, she had been doing him she was mourning for an irreparable wrong. Thenceforward, her assent once given, even the impatient Philip found small reason to complain of the shy ardour with which the lady pressed forward the arrangements for the wedding. Wedded they had been—wedded in London, in the month of May, and with just as much display and company as might shut the mouths of those likely to talk of a hole-and-corner marriage “for family reasons.”

This time, with a not unnatural superstition, neither Philip nor his bride would hear of Barham. What is more, after passing the crescent-infancy of the honeymoon at Haughton Towers, they had continued their wedding-trip to Allonby, Alice had persuaded her husband to defer, for a few weeks, their intended visit to his Tipperary bogs. She had determined to people that deserted home of her brother's, with what should be the brightest memories of her new existence. In her heart she felt that shunning all that had belonged to him as plague-stricken was like giving him over to the inexorable excommunication he had courted. In her heart she clung to the hope of his repentance and restoration. She told herself, and insisted on it, that time must raise the ban, and bring the wolf's head back to the society that had cast him out from it—restore the hopeless prodigal to the sister that only longed to clasp him forgivingly in her arms.

It was early in the season for honeymooning it in the North; but the Northumbrian skies consented to smooth their frowns. It was a bright, low-roofed picturesque abode, of the luxurious cottage order—the one that Ralph and his sister had built by the grey old Peel. The sloping lawns and flower-beds that sheltered in the broken foreground touched with a sense of comparative calm the eye that came back from the harsher tints and wilder outlines of the Cheviots. The spring rains had ceased, to leave a dazzling green on the cliff-locked Alps and mountain-paddocks, a warm russet glow on the swarthy features of the sullen moors; the streams had filtered their brown floods after the first settling of the winter waters, and now came leaping down the becks and the dells in a flush of flashing, tumbling crystals; the dew-damped orange lichens, on

grey cliff and stone, blazed in Southern brightness as they met the morning sunbeams, and forced the grim rocks to break in spite of themselves into reluctant smiles, sharing the general gladness of regenerated nature. Many a hard buffet from the elements had those rocks stood in their time. Flood and blast had grooved many a deep-drawn line on their careworn faces; but even they had their seasons of the saddened enjoyment of experience.

Alice was seated in a garden-chair, outside the window-door that opened on the gravel. Bourke was lolling on a couch within, his looks straying back and forwards from his wife as he pretended to trifle with his breakfast-cup, and read the paper. Of a sudden he saw the eyes that a moment before had been dancing with life were dim with tears. As she turned her head from him her shoulder rose and fell with a very visible sigh. Of course, the *Times* went rustling to the carpet, and his arm was passed around her, while his lip was pressed on her cheek.

"Take care, Philip dear," she exclaimed, affecting to start from him, with a shy glance round at the shrubs, and a pretty air of scared matronly modesty. "What *would* the gardener say?"

"Bother the gardener!" rejoined her husband, asserting his marital proprietorship, and repressing the light resistance that seemed ready enough to submit upon compulsion—"Bother the gardener! Besides, to do him justice, the man is delicacy itself, and shirks his work to the very utmost, doubtless, out of regard for your susceptibilities. But, Alice dear, I shall never forgive you for having brought me here if you give yourself over to the melancholy associations I dreaded for you."

"You must bear with me sometimes, Philip, when you remember my sadness comes of the happiness you are making for me. You married me with a living sorrow, and for your sake I am schooling myself to bear regrets that I hope may last while suspense endures. Alas! I find already I was more fickle than I feared; the sorrow begins to die, and you make me forget far too often all I ought to remember; and after all it only deepens love when you have the griefs sent you that help you to realize its blessedness."

Philip said nothing, but clasped her waist the tighter. He knew when her thoughts were away in search of the lost one, seeking him in all the situations a self-torturing fancy could picture, it was well nigh hopeless to call them back.

She resumed after a minute or two.

"When one feels the luxury of a scene like this, and no one had a keener sense of enjoyment in nature than he; when one thinks that he might have been where we are now had he only contented himself with the innocent pleasures within his reach; when we remember what he is—oh, Philip, it is intolerable when one tries to realize it; if we had only an idea where he is or what he is!"

"I wish to Heaven we had, Alice. For your sake, and for his own." Philip threw in the last four words with a jerk. "I would give anything to have him back with us. But we have not the faintest clue, and then, as you know, when he sent those deeds of transfer he made it his earnest prayer we should not seek to trace him."

"I know, I know; but the prayer was wrung from him by the first burst of despair, and the fresh sense of humiliation. It was his repentance and generosity

that made him snap the last ties that bound him to all he loved; for he did love me, Philip, and—— you should feel for him.”

“I do, Alice. God knows you have only to persuade me what is best to be done, and I shall strain every nerve to do it. But for ordinary men to follow one like Ralph, who is at home everywhere, and in all circumstances—who can talk half-a-dozen languages like a native—who may have lost himself in the steppes of Tartary or the pampas of South America, for Hardcastle says that long ago when he seemed most closely wedded to steady English ways, he used to look back longingly to the adventures of his youth; when one thinks of following him, it seems to me nothing better than a wild-goose chase in empty space. He may come back of himself, and so I always tell you I hope and think he will—but——”

He broke off short as a bell resounded through the house. “Some one at the front door, Alice; who can it be? Dry your eyes, darling, or stay—beat a retreat for a minute—Ridley most likely.”

Our old friend Ridley it was, arriving big with some eventful news, that had visibly disturbed the equilibrium of the steadfast Northumbrian. He was evidently bursting with excitement.

“Good-morning, Mr. Ridley. You’ve breakfasted I don’t doubt; I know your early habits. Well, what is it? I see you’ve something to communicate.”

Bourke was almost as anxious to hear as Ridley to speak. His first idea linked the agent’s excited manner with his own talk with his wife. Did he come with tidings of the late lord of Allonby? No, it was nothing of that; only with news that would have been

salvation to the missing one, had they come to him a year before.

"Indeed I have something to communicate, Captain Bourke; I'm the last man to care to count my chickens before they are hatched, yet I hope I bring Mrs. Bourke and you the promise of a wedding present worth your acceptance."

"Well, Mr. Ridley, I see you have good news for us, so I think I had better call my wife. Perhaps you'd like to tell her of them yourself."

Mr. Ridley bowed and smiled: "I am sure Mrs. Bourke ought to like to hear of them."

Alice was fetched accordingly. She came in, scrupulously keeping her back turned to the light, striving her utmost to conceal the fact that her eyes had dressed themselves in light mourning in her honeymoon; still under the grave impression of her late conversation, but doing her civil best to seem interested in the new one.

"I must offer you my warm congratulations, Mrs. Bourke, in not having disposed of the western part of the property when you set to work clearing encumbrances."

"If there is anything to congratulate us on, I am sure we owe it all to you, Mr. Ridley. I know how strongly you urged us, if we sold anything, not to part with that."

"Certainly," chimed in Bourke, "and, as I said at the time, to us the advice seemed rather unaccountable, judging by the plans. It looked an outlying bit of property, we should scarcely miss; but I suppose you had some reason you did not care to tell us then, and are come to tell us now."

"You are not far wrong, sir: yes, I had a reason

that I should only have brought forward in the last resort, and I feel I should crave your forgiveness for having kept it a secret. I never like to speak without book, or excite hopes that may never come to fruition; and, moreover, when I heard Mrs. Bourke talked of coming to Allonby after her marriage, I felt strongly tempted by the prospect of preparing her an agreeable surprise."

"Yes?"

"I had long believed that there must be lead in the Scala Fell. I know little of mining matters myself, except in the very roughest fashion, but a month or two ago indications were brought to my notice that made me fancy the matter worth the looking into. I sent for a good practical mining engineer, and set him to work quietly. If slow is sure, he has been slow enough to give you every confidence in his judgment. Some weeks back he pronounced favourably, but in very general terms; since that he has been steadily at work on details. It was only yesterday evening I persuaded him to speak, but then, to do him justice, he spoke to some purpose. And this morning I have been with him looking carefully at the veins. Why, sir, you can see the grey metal in the ores, and trace it too as it skirts and skims, rather than dips. He has the reputation of a steady-going man who never overstates the truth, and accordingly I believe him when he says he never saw promise of a richer lead mine, nor one more easily worked."

"Then I presume it will greatly raise the value of the property."

"Raise it, Captain Bourke. I'm a canny Northumbrian myself, sir, and so is my friend Howker the mining engineer; but if he be right in what he says, it's no

extravagant estimate to count on the rental doubling. So the Scala Fell lead mines are the wedding present I proposed myself the pleasure of offering Mrs. Bourke—she must permit me to consider the expense of the survey as my affair—and very happy I am to be able to congratulate her on the prospect of so splendid an income from Allonby.”

Ridley had been too much excited and interested in his story, had taken the probable effect of the good news too much for granted, to remark its extraordinary effect on the lady. Now he was equally surprised and mortified to see her throw a look of sorrow and dismay at her husband, raise her handkerchief to her eyes, and hurry from the room. Hard stuff as he was made of, he positively staggered as he blundered to his feet to let her pass, looking in the extreme of bewilderment to Bourke for an explanation. Bourke understood his wife thoroughly, and followed her feelings more unerringly than Howker’s judgment did the vein in the Scala Fell; but he was greatly embarrassed as to how far he could or should explain. Then recollecting how extraordinary and ungracious silence must seem, remembering, moreover, how much Ridley’s intelligence would find out for itself, were it once piqued and set a working; how much he probably knew or guessed already, he took his decision.

“It would be ungrateful indeed, Mr. Ridley, leaving you to fancy my wife does not understand how much we owe to your energy; and there is nothing I feel more certain of, than that we can place the most absolute confidence in your discretion. But you can understand she feels her brother’s absence, and would very much have preferred that this windfall had come in his time.”

A word was quite as good as a wink to Ridley;

Bourke's hint was sufficient to make him thoroughly understand Mrs. Bourke's agitation and enter into her feelings. Of course he had taken at its true value the story palmed off on the public as to Ralph's disappearance, and although his shrewdness could not supply all the details, it had left him very few to fill in. So he justified Bourke's opinion by saying little more on the subject, and contented himself with carrying off the male turtledove to see all that was to be seen. And Bourke examined everything methodically, and with no small interest, notwithstanding his peculiar circumstances. It is only in novels that the sweetest of honeymoons exalts one above sublunary considerations, and Bourke was by no means insensible to the practical value of many thousands a-year; but this examination over, his love lent him wings, and he galloped back to his wife.

"Well, Philip?"

"Well, Alice; Ridley is right, no one but the gnome of the mine can speak accurately as to the worth of its contents. But from what Ridley showed me and Howker says, I have no reason to suspect they exaggerate when they pronounce it immensely valuable. You were almost too much of an heiress before, and it seems likely that this may double your fortune. Yes, I know what you mean; you feel you should hold it in trust, and get rid of it as quickly as may be. And, of course, darling, I agree with you that it is another and a very strong motive for hunting down your brother. It is a lamentable pity that all this should not have happened a year ago. To think that all the time he had wealth for the gathering, if he had only known it, and was actually walking over hidden treasures when he shot the Scala moors."

“Sad enough, Philip; and yet how can we dare say it is not better as it is: if he had found the key to them they might have all gone with the rest, or prosperity might have crowned sin and the inevitable penalty been paid elsewhere. Now he has had his lesson; if it has been a bitter and a sharp one, at least it has driven him to repentance and restitution, so far as it lay in his power. Surely he was sorely tempted before he fell; he has repented and merciful Providence offers him another chance, and gives him fresh riches in the place of those he abused. Surely it intends he shall come back to us—surely it has happiness in store for him yet.”

“It may be so, Alice, and rely upon it I shall leave no stone unturned to find him; but—a trace,—a trace. We heard of him at Brussels, we know he saw this Herr Müller at Heppenstall; we know he buried himself for some weeks at Wildbad, till he sent you those deeds that stripped him of his properties, and kept himself so closely that we only knew he had been there when he had gone, and after that, he disappears as utterly as the bubbles dancing down the stream there. We should hardly like to employ professed detectives to seek the clue.”

Alice shook her head decidedly.

“And yet who else can help us? I don’t know, I confess. If Hardcastle were not tied—he likes Ralph—he knows the world well; he has had the habit of adventure himself, he could find his way where other men would be abroad, and wade in troubled waters where other men would be drowning.”

Alice’s face brightened as her husband spoke. “I’m grieved to bring a third person here from the outer world to disturb our happy *tête-à-tête*, but this very

afternoon I shall write and beg Mr. Hardcastle to come and see us. At any rate he can advise and suggest."

"Nothing is less likely than his being able to get leave of absence on such sudden notice."

"Lord Wharfdale is in town. I shall send him a line and beg him to manage it."

"Very well dear, have it your own way. I don't think you can do better. You can turn Hardcastle round your thumb I know; only don't abuse your influence with him, and before you cast him back again upon the world, be sure you can persuade him to let you break his fall. It would be too bad taking advantage of his amiable weaknesses, to make him a vagabond in his old age."

CHAPTER XXIV.

HARDCASTLE TRAVELS ON RALPH'S TRAIL.

HARDCASTLE obtained his leave by Lord Wharfdale's interposition, and hurried down obedient to Mrs. Bourke's commands. She had never felt so warmly to him, as when, on learning her new accession of wealth, he burst into a heart-felt expression of sorrow. The "poor Dacre! what infernal luck?" was the vigorous echo of her inmost thoughts. So she consulted him over the chances of finding the truant with less caution than she might otherwise have done, and her spirits sunk when she saw him look so grave, and give her no sort of encouragement. "Philip might have spared his warning," she thought bitterly to herself. "Mr. Hard-

castle has no idea of exciting himself in the matter." And as she awkwardly improvised some suggestions of her own,—she had fully expected the suggestions to come from him—Mr. Hardcastle looked more *distrain*, as he answered absolutely at random. In vain she tried to interest him. His thoughts were plainly elsewhere, and her disappointment and vexation made her speak far more sharply than her wont. "But I am really grieved, Mr. Hardcastle, I should have brought you here, when naturally you would much rather be elsewhere; or troubled you to travel so far on a painful business you have no concern in."

Hardcastle pricked his ear to the unwonted change in her tone, and to that speech of hers he listened so eagerly, that her voice began to falter regretfully ere she had finished. Then he brought his heavy fist down on the table, with a violence that made the water splash from the vase of flowers that stood before him. "Forgive me, Alice,—Mrs. Bourke," he exclaimed penitently as he saw her start, while his rough face blushed like a girl's. "Forgive me, Mrs. Bourke, but I'm not much given to shamming, and unless I speak out the truth bluntly, and let my feelings have their way, I'm pretty sure to make a mess of it. And God forgive you, if you think I'm not interested in the matter, or that I would not lay down the fag end of my life, if it were any profit to you, or to Ralph either, for the matter of that. The long and the short of it is this,—recklessness was bred in my cradle, I fancy, and it will only die in my coffin. Ralph did not cure me of it when he caught me and put me in Government harness. I live from hand to mouth, and seldom give a thought to the morrow. And so I say the long and the short of it is, I have not laid by a shilling since I've been working as

a Foreign Office hack, and now I find myself tethered by the leg, when I would give the world to be a free man at your service."

"Oh," sighed out Alice with an immense relief from the very depths of her bosom. Then remembering again her husband's warning words, she came to a dead standstill, and added nothing to the ejaculation. Fortunately for her, Hardcastle fully comprehended all she would have said had she spoken, and was more than willing to help her out.

"Look here, Alice, I've come to regard you as much as a daughter as a rough old rascal dared, and when you ordered me to call you by your Christian name, I obeyed, as I always do, and accepted something of a father's privileges. Heaven knows how proud I have been of them, and now I'm going to abuse them, and make you a confession into the bargain. You can't fancy how tired I am of that same harness I've been working in; of those regular journeys to order, that play the very mischief with a man who's been in the way of having no master but himself. Then to my mind, the regular pay and allowances spoil half the fun of life. It seems like a providence, your wanting your brother looked for, because I fancy it's one of the very few things I can do better than most men. So if you like to trust me, you give me my travelling orders and I shall start when you please, and hunt him up somehow, I make no manner of doubt. Only you must behave, as a dutiful daughter should, and not grumble if I dip in your purse. Fortunately it seems likely to be more full than ever."

Alice had no voice to answer when her old friend finished this unusually lengthy speech, but she caught both his hands in hers and covered them with kisses.

"I dare not refuse your offer," she said at last, "although I fear—I believe, I am doing you great wrong in accepting it. But I see in it the only chance of my brother's salvation and——"

"Enough, enough," cut in Hardcastle, who felt himself terribly embarrassed under the overpowering gratitude of Alice. "It's too absurd, your insisting on screwing a sacrifice out of what will give me a new lease of life."

"Oh, Mr. Hardcastle, let there be no pretences between you and me. I feel all your goodness and your delicacy although I can say nothing. But for my own peace of mind, I must impose conditions before I accept your kindness, or you may turn on me and disown me as a daughter, when you have done my work."

Then began negotiations which Hardcastle would fain have cut very short, had not Alice been stammeringly inexorable. But when he saw her determined his future should be secured before she would suffer him to compromise his present, he reluctantly submitted to her terms. If he would help her to the aim she had so deeply at heart, he saw he must consent to put his pride in his pocket, and in the end the preliminaries were arranged to her satisfaction at all events. It was settled he should kick himself clear of the official harness with what speed he could, and be off upon the trail of the wanderer as soon as might be.

He knew he must strike it at Heppenstall, although doubtless since he disappeared from thence Ralph had done all he knew to blind it. But he might have left some little trace behind, dropped some hint before the respectable Müller, that would suffice to lay so keen a sleuth-hound as Hardcastle on the scent. Hardcastle

acknowledged in his heart, that he wronged Ralph's intelligence in thinking so, and it surprised him little, although it did disappoint him, to find Müller could give him no help in the matter. Müller received the visitor at first with a repugnance that his ill-concealed awe made the more visible. The steady-going old plodder who rarely went out of his parish, and had but once crossed the frontier of his shred of a state, had no sympathy with this wild rolling stone. He suspected that his baleful influence on Ralph had helped to keep the English lord of Heppenstall a perverse absentee from the Stammschloss of his German forefathers. But when he learned the real meaning of Hardcastle's present errand, that if Dacre were found and reclaimed, the chances were he might make his home in the Schwarzwald, then his manner changed to hospitable cordiality; he almost forced the stranger within his gates; thrust him down at the supper-table, *trinquet* to him in the best wine in his cellar, willingly told him all he knew, sorely strained his memory to help him, and as Hardcastle shrewdly suspected, made some unsuccessful efforts towards rousing a singularly sluggish invention. Not that his stray shreds of embellished fact were much in the way of evidence when all was said and done.

“Mein Gott, mein Gott, lieber herr Hardcastle, when the gracious Baron came here he looked, believe me, more like a dead man than a living one. Yet pale as he was his eye could look bright enough, as you'd say had you seen it blaze when I condoled with him on his health, and said I trusted he had come at last to settle under the rooftree of Heppenstall. There was no such place on earth I knew, and I fancied now the State had paid its debt he might be come with the notice

of restoring the castle. If you had seen his face when I spoke of it—he could scarcely have looked more angry had I talked of razing the schloss to the ground. And he shut himself up in his rooms there with only old Lisbeth Schlemmer from the village here to wait upon him; put up with anything she could cook for him, he who used to be so particular; and never stirred across the threshold unless with the bats and the owls of an evening.”

So the worthy Müller babbled on, but whatever he might tell of the Baron’s habits he threw but little light upon his plans.

“Once when I spoke of his being here next summer to give his own orders about the autumn thinnings in the Eulengrund, he only cut me short and snapped savagely, as he so often did nowadays. ‘Next summer you must act for yourself or take your instructions from my sister.’ And he added, as if talking to himself and forgetting me—he often seemed to do that—‘Heaven send the next summer see me many a thousand miles off.’”

Thus, on the whole, Hardcastle found his original impression confirmed. Dacre had burst away to carry his shame and sorrow, and it might be hoped his repentance, into the easier atmosphere of savage life. Most likely he was ranging the skirts of law and civilization, if he had not crossed their confines. “At any rate I’ve sucked old Müller’s brains,” he reflected, as he hypocritically beamed on his unconscious host in all good fellowship, “and precious little I’ve found there. I might nearly as well have been tapping a rotten cocoa-nut as that wizened old scull.” And the night’s reflection resulted in the morning’s determination to adjourn for a day or two to Baden-Baden. It was true it was somewhat early in the season, and the society as yet was

comparatively select in all senses. Still Müller believed that Ralph had passed by Baden when he parted from Heppenstall; it was barely possible something might be learned at the bankers for the Heppenstall property. After all it was as good a resting-place for that day or two as any other; at the worst it would give him breathing space to think over his future strategy.

It was too early in the season for late *tables d'hôte*, so Hardcastle ordered his snug little meal *à la carte*. He had taken up his quarters at the *Hôtel de l'Europe*, immediately opposite the Kursaal, and he seated himself in one of the windows that look across the murmuring Oos to the foliage-shaded promenade, luxuriously savouring, between the dishes they deliberately served him, the fragrant bouquet of his Forster Traminer. Not many passers-by. It is just the hour when citizens and Bath guests alike suppress themselves, abandoning the Kursaal alleys to the sparrows and the booth-keepers. But by-and-by minstrels in frogged coats and braided caps are seen wending casino-wards in twos and threes; and soon the strains of the band floating from the orchestra kiosk trouble the surrounding stagnation, and stray waves of life begin to set towards what should be the centre of dissipation.

Hardcastle listlessly regarded the various groups and individuals who lolled or strolled past his eyes. Nothing very marked about the most of them,—worthy Baden townsfolk or highly respectable valetudinarians. Here and there came a slangy-looking skirmisher, who had thrown himself out in advance of the great army of the *rascaille*, due six weeks later; his questionable complexion and the shining seams of his coat showing painfully in the shower-washed spring sunshine. As dilapidations are always more picturesque than what is in

unimpeachable repair, Hardcastle naturally devoted to these last most of the attention he spared from his dinner. Perhaps he had some secret sympathy with the shady-looking scamp he might well have been had Providence been as unpropitious to himself.

Of a sudden his attention was arrested as he saw a figure he fancied he recognized approaching from the side of the Cour de Bade. Yes, upon second thoughts there was no mistaking him. Yet it was an odd coincidence that Asgill should turn up just as his mind was full of Dacre. Of Asgill and his dealings Hardcastle knew quite enough to surmise that all along he had been Dacre's evil genius; but all the same, he did not on that account regard him so resentfully as most friends of Dacre might have done. He condemned him for a thorough-going bad one, and shrewdly suspected him for a swindler. Yet he admitted him to a certain toleration—gave his rascality all the benefit it could claim from extenuating circumstances, inasmuch as the injuries he had inflicted had been inflicted solely from self interest aping necessity. So, although he had to swallow some scruples as to accosting this very black sheep in decently friendly fashion, he did manage to gulp them down. And meanwhile there was no hurry in the matter; Asgill was marked down in the Kursaal, where Hardcastle would be safe to find him when he pleased. So our friend called for another flask of the Forster Traminer to wash down those same scruples we spoke of, and scour up his intellect in case he should want it in the coming interview.

Asgill's decadence had been swift indeed since his last hopes had broken down with Rocroy. Already it looked as if he had been driven to trading on his wardrobe to keep his body and his soul together. No more

resplendent white waistcoats! A frock-coat visibly stained and frayed, was buttoned suspiciously close and high, considering the weather was very far from cool for a Baden May. No watch-chain, no pin, no ring, the shortcomings in the dress suspiciously counterbalanced by an affection of swagger strange to his old bearing. If clothes don't go to make the man, they do go a very long way towards padding out the rascal, and the strength of many a scamp's assurance lies quite as much in the cut and quality of his garment as Sampson's did in his luxuriant locks. Add to the shortcomings of the outward man the troubles of the inner consciousness,—that Asgill knew himself a defaulter to be tabooed, insulted, or even assaulted by those whose nods had been as the very breath of his nostrils, and no wonder when his restless eyes chanced to encounter the gaze of Hardcastle he should have sought to shun that gentleman. Hardcastle had the reputation of being rough and ready, and he had been the intimate ally of Ralph Dacre to boot, reasons sufficient for Asgill's strong reluctance to abide his greeting.

But without changing retreat for absolute flight there was no escape for him. After all, if there was to be a scene with a man of Hardcastle's temperament it might be safer to have it before witnesses. So after having played the rabbit to Hardcastle's ferret for a minute, and shot quietly through several of the curtained doors without shaking off his pursuer, Asgill took heart of grace, bolted out upon the terrace, seated himself at one of the small tables and called for cognac and water. Hardcastle appropriated the next one and asked for coffee, drew out his cigar-case, lit his cigar, and tossed the lighted match backwards towards his neighbour. Asgill scraped his boot on the gravel as he started slightly.

Hardcastle immediately turned to apologise and stared. There was sufficient *bonhomie* in his manner as he lifted his hat to make Asgill feel greatly relieved.

"What! Mr. Asgill? Really this is a pleasure I never looked for."

Asgill's thoughts were busy as he returned the other's greeting. "Impossible," he soliloquized, "that he should not know a good deal about everything. And yet I don't know. Dacre was as close as wax, and those Foreign Office fellows are constantly on the move, and out of the way of hearing scandal." Meanwhile he bowed and replied.

"I beg your pardon, sir, but really you have the advantage of me. Oh, Mr. Hardcastle, I believe? A flying visit to Baden, Mr. Hardcastle, or do you propose making any stay?"

"Upon my word, Mr. Asgill, I can't say; it is very possible you may help me to a decision. You used to know Ralph Dacre well. I wish to heaven you could tell me anything of him now; I want to find him for pressing reasons."

Asgill had started as he heard Dacre named, but Hardcastle had not been mistaken in fancying the straightest road to his end might at the same time be the surest. For Asgill was greatly reassured; placed so entirely at his ease, indeed, that his lightened spirit felt almost disposed to badinage.

"When I parted from poor Ralph Dacre last there were a great many other friends of our's who shared that feeling strongly. When Rocroy shot Dacre and me over his head he landed both of us in a devil of a hole. The difference in his case was he found friends to pull him out, and very glad I was to hear it. I've had a facer myself that has knocked me out of the ring for good,

but it would be no comfort to me, as it would to some fellows, to hear that an old acquaintance couldn't come to time when time was called."

Hardcastle looked hard at Asgill to assure himself he was not being humbugged. That gentleman went on—

"No: I fancy I may take it for granted that if any one 'wants' Dacre now it's to tell him that something has turned up to his advantage?"

"At any rate, Mr. Asgill, you may be sure I should not be in it if it were otherwise."

"Exactly. Well, I should be very glad for Dacre's sake if I could tell you what you want to find out, only, unluckily, I don't know from Adam where he's got to——"

"Then why the foul fiend——" broke in the impetuous Hardcastle, whose hopes had been unduly raised by the promise of Asgill's words and manner. Asgill made a swift movement of deprecation, which had the effect of gaining him a fresh hearing from his fiery interlocutor.

"Why, Mr. Hardcastle, you surely never expected to put your hand upon your man at the very first go off, or even to be laid upon a trail like his! If he were determined to lose himself, I should have thought you would have given him credit for sagacity enough to do it; but, if you will only hear me to an end, I think I may give you a hint that may serve your purpose."

Hardcastle's face fell; he leaned back in his chair, and enveloped himself in a volume of cigar-smoke.

"No; I have not an idea where Dacre is, although I did see him once, since both of us crossed the Channel after that most unlucky Friday. It was at

Brussels, and I ran right into his arms as I turned out of the door of the Hotel Tirlemont—cheap and good, and very quiet—where I had taken up my quarters; not a soul in the street; and, to tell you the honest truth, I did not half like it, for Dacre, as I knew, was half desperate, and then it was I who had put him on for this last good thing.”

“And for many another good thing besides,” interposed Hardcastle.

“Precisely so, worse luck for both of us; and I feared he might remember that. At the first sight of me he did look bad enough as he started back. I had only seen him like that twice, and each time I came near having cause to remember it. Well, never mind. While I stood all taken aback his look changed of a sudden, and he reached me out his hand. I took it, for I saw in his face there was no trap, and, after all, I had meant nothing but good by him when I gave him that cursed tip about Rocroy. ‘You’ve done me a deal of mischief, Asgill,’ he said, ‘but you could never have hurt me had I not given you the chance. Now that it is too late I feel I have been so much my own enemy from the first that I dare not bear malice to other people. Some people might blame me for shaking hands with a for—.’” There Asgill remembered himself, and pulled up with an awkward jerk on the initial syllable of the ugly epithet. Whether Hardcastle or no supplied the other one, he said nothing, but merely nodded. Asgill’s frankness may have disarmed him, and that gentleman hurriedly added—

“No use troubling you with babble like that. In short, he called himself a swindler and worse, and never showed a flash of anger except when I told him to keep his heart up; that the scandal, if scandal there

was, had been half hushed already; that there might be a good time coming yet. Then he did lose temper, and flashed his eye, and his teeth as well, like a wolf who meant to fly at your jugular. He had done with the world, he said, and intended to turn over to a new chapter that should only be for his own reading; the shorter it might be the better for him. Something more he said, and all he said gave me the idea of a desperate man who meant himself a mischief, although he won't do it with his own hands. But, bless you, Mr. Hardcastle, I know what that sort of thing comes to. There are moments when I could fancy myself passing through something of the sort if I were only younger and a little hotter. It always quiets down when the first smart goes off. Take my word for it, by the time Dacre has missed being hugged by a grizzly or scored by a man-eater; by the time he has had a turn-up with the Bedouins, or carried his scalp through Indian tomahawks,—he will begin to feel pretty comfortable in his mind and think of home again."

"Humph! Well, Mr. Asgill, if that is all you have to tell, you tell me little more than I guessed."

"It is not quite all, nor is it even the hint I spoke of. Ralph Dacre saw Madame de Chaillot, Miss Rufford that was, in Brussels. What is more, I happen to know he dined with her once at her hotel, and with my own eyes I saw him driving with her in her carriage."

"And you think——?"

"Nothing, except that she held him out a hand when all the world had cut him, and contrived to persuade him to take it. So, if any one in the world was likely to learn anything of his plans, of course it was Madame de Chaillot."

"You don't happen to know where she may be now?"

"Not I; but I can find the address of her apartment in Paris for you straightway; she should be at home at this season, and I really don't think you can do better than go and see her. You may have heard of Gaboche——"

Hardcastle nodded.

"Well, the ex-millionaire is now on Benazet's staff at Baden. He held shares in the bank here in his palmy days, and thought of offering the direction his services when the world burst up with him, as it did with the rest of us. They knew his talents for finance and accepted him. So here he is, and he has already obtained promotion."

Accordingly Hardcastle following Asgill into the gaming *salon*, became conscious of the corpulent figure of the quondam financier perched high upon an elevated chair, superintending the dealings and disbursements of the croupiers. Sooth to say, he seemed greatly more in his appropriate sphere, than when he had done the honours of his sumptuous Parisian salons. But he could not so lightly reconcile himself to the lot he was in reality admirably fitted to adorn. Discontent, baulked cupidity, and disappointed ambition, were gnawing at his vitals, and the vision of the gold and notes of which he was nothing more than the guardian, was perpetual misery to him. However, when his old associate whispered in his ear a request for the information they wanted, he responded with alacrity and with tolerable grace. He knew that Asgill knew that before he had been put in the way of getting an honest livelihood, he had made more than one application for assistance to the lady and not unsuccessfully.

By this time, Hardcastle had come to regard Asgill almost with friendly feelings, and Asgill was sharp to remark the change. He had worked with a will at showing an interest in Ralph, and in supplying Hardcastle with the stray hints that might help him in his quest. It is true his work had been made easy to him, by an honest desire to do his old ally a good turn if he could, but of course his uppermost idea had been to earn a fair wage by it. No wonder. We know that the whole world did not weigh with him a feather-weight in consideration of himself and his interests, and now his interests were the more pertinaciously self-engrossing, that his daily crust became the pressing question. He half repented one of the first deeds he had done for long from a tolerably kindly motive, when he heard Hardcastle say with the decision that rings the knell of all thoughts of shaking it: "Well, thanks to you Mr. Asgill, I shall be off to Paris by the very first train to-morrow." He had never dreamed of a man like Hardcastle, with time on his hands and money in his pockets, hurrying so quickly away, even from Baden out of the season. What should he do now? Propose *écarté*, or throw himself on Hardcastle's charity. All things considered the latter might be the more profitable, as well as the safer game. So he proffered the prayer that had been on his lips for long, in something of the jaunty air with which in his palmy days, he might have told a friend at a whist party, he had left his purse at home. He concluded,— "and to be very frank, Mr. Hardcastle, if I give you my promise to repay you punctually, I don't at all advise you to trust it."

"I shouldn't," exclaimed Hardcastle bluntly. "Now confidence for confidence. Personally, I am nearly as

poor a man as you are, bar debts, and in hunting for Dacre, it's not my own money I'm spending. If it were I might be generous, but the money is his sister's. As to whether she owes you much, you should be the best judge, but this I can say for her, she will be content to forget old debts, and pay any one handsomely for information that may help her in the matter she has at heart. Only you find Dacre for us, and after all that is come and gone, you shall find him a good friend again. If Madame de Chaillot tells me anything, I shall consider the information comes from you, and advise Mrs. Bourke to pay accordingly. Meantime you must see I have learned little but what I knew before, and I can hardly reconcile it to my conscience, giving even what I give."

A couple of napoleons chinked in Asgill's hand, and his face flushed as he felt them light there. He had swindled and forged, and borrowed without the thought of paying; filched money in every conceivable way short of open robbery or petty stealing, but never yet had he received an alms. After all, he had been born and bred a gentleman, and long associated with gentlemen, he had acquired their prejudices if not their principles; and his first impulse was to throw the napoleons back in the donor's face. Prudence, and fear of bodily consequences first restrained him; then came the thought of his empty purse, and the famine that was snarling so close at his heels. So he put his pride and the gold in his pocket, and with a desperate gulp and a ghastly smile, thanked Hardcastle for that, and the promise of those future favours he hoped he might merit.

Hardcastle saw his emotion, suspected its cause, and half-relented. But he was not made of impressionable,

or over delicate stuff, and he reflected: "After all, if the rascal suffers, it serves him richly right. Black old scores are not to be wiped away by an hour of tolerable behaviour."

Asgill did suffer, and keenly. There was plenty of misery in store for him—misery of body and mind, but he was little likely to pass many more wretched nights than that, although it saw him a richer man by forty francs; nor did he ever receive vicarious payment for information given by Madame de Chaillot. Hardcastle saw that lady. She received him kindly enough, and did not hesitate to tell him she might have been indiscreet as to anything that had passed between her and Ralph, could the indiscretion have helped Hardcastle on his mission. Unluckily, like Müller and the rest of them, she had nothing to tell. Nothing more than that Ralph had left Brussels for Heppenstall. "He promised to do nothing desperate, and if that meant laying violent hands upon himself, there I believe him. But I can answer for nothing else, and grieved I am, Mr. Hardcastle, for the sake of old times. The utmost my importunities could win from him was a half-promise I might hear of him again. If ever I do, and I greatly doubt it, I shall lose no time in communicating with you or his sister." And with that Hardcastle was fain to be content.

CHAPTER XXV.

AND LIGHTS AT LAST UPON HIS TRACES.

WHEN Bourke bade farewell to his villa at Sorrento, little did he think he would ever inhabit it again, or revisit it in such circumstances as in the autumn of 1867. But when his nephew and niece talked of wintering in the eternal city, and insisted on carrying him with them, he made it a condition they should spend some weeks on their way to it, on his favourite Campanian shores. And arrived at Naples, he chanced to hear at his bankers that his old quarters were to be vacant; that the restless American family who had taken them, was anxious to find a tenant for the fag end of the Sorrento season. The temptation was irresistible. Bourke persuaded his relatives to humour him, and closed forthwith. It was delightful to bring out in vivid and constant contrast with the present, the self-imposed isolation of the past, when he played at misanthropy until the game had well nigh turned to solemn irretrievable earnest. Few men had less of the misanthrope at core; he shuddered at the retrospect of those misspent years, and yet he could scarcely regret them as he thought of the zest they gave to his green old age. A change indeed from the old times. The light muslins of Alice and her maid and the nurses, fluttering up and down the gaunt corridors and grim marble staircases. Philip's hearty voice echoing among the vases and statues on the terrace that crowned the cliff, as he smoked and chatted and laughed with cronies he had managed to unearth in the surrounding villas and hotels or had

persuaded thither from Castellamare and Naples. Children toddling along in the great balconies, playing hide and seek among the persiennes and rose-laden jalousies; a baby crowing in the nurse's arms, and positively in the infatuation of his reaction, he had his sleeping-room near to the nursery, and rather enjoyed being roused by its screams, from his beauty slumbers. Regular hours for meals, and an orthodox English breakfast with hot tea and coffee at nine; it might be no improvement on the more indolent and frugal habits of his ancient life, but it brought vividly home to him the respectability in which he had learned to revel. Like the prodigal reclaimed in his old age to the ties he has snapped, and the affections he has been mocking at, he would have doubted the reality of his miraculous conversion, had he not been always convincing himself by its visible signs.

"No Antonio; no papers yet?" exclaimed Philip Bourke one morning, as they were lolling about after breakfast under the trelliced verandah on the shady side of the house.

"What a restless mortal you are, Philip," rejoined his wife. "The Irish quicksilver in your veins is certainly antipathetical to the Italian languor. Now that you have substituted a special service of posts from the Piazza, for the halting old letter-carrier, surely you can afford to wait quietly. And the idea of caring about papers, when we are expecting every day to hear of the arrival of the Wharfdales' yacht at Messina."

"Well, Alice, I don't much care for letters myself at any time, but I do want to hear the news from Naples. They say they mobbed the Syndic the other day, pulled down the railings in the Villa Reale, and the royal arms everywhere, and smashed the windows of

the Café Europa. Those infernal Italian papers lie like bulletins, but *The Times* is sure to have the rights of the story. But I shall be glad all the same when Wharfdale and his wife turn up. I shall endeavour to discharge my duties to society, by impressing his Lordship with a sense of his new responsibilities. He neglects them shockingly, or he would not be here. To see him and hear him talk, one would fancy he was Dick Rufford still, and had never succeeded to the title and the properties."

"Aye, poor Wharfdale; how I wish he were alive, and on board the *Ione* as he had hoped to be. Not that Dick Rufford that was isn't a good fellow in his way," broke in his uncle; and then he broke off in the tribute he was paying his old friend's memory; for now-a-days Bourke the elder carried the cultivation of cheerfulness to a passion. "But here comes Antonio with the budget." And the portly form of the courier came striding up the vista of orange trees.

"And here is a letter from Edith," exclaimed Alice, "and dated, whence do you think?—from Naples Bay," she ejaculated delightedly, when she had torn it open. "They got our letters at Messina, and as we talked of going to Rome early in November, came on straight to Naples, mean to lunch with the San Lorenzos, and will be with us this afternoon. They get to Castellamare by the train at half-past three. Of course, Philip, dear, I shall drive over and meet Edith."

Surprise on surprise. Alice meets more friends than she expected at Castellamare. Busying himself among the Wharfdales' packages on the platform, was a tall military-looking gentleman, who turned his back perseveringly on her at first, and afterwards when the greeting could be deferred no longer, held out his

hand in rather shame-faced silence. Alice seized on the brown fingers and squeezed them in her own, till she split her delicate tight-fitting glove, and she looked and felt more than half tempted to embrace him.

"What, my dear, dear Mr. Hardcastle. How could you think of coming without writing me beforehand, and giving me the pleasure of counting the hours to your visit?"

"If that were the worst, Mrs. Bourke," exclaimed our old friend Lord Wharfdale, Richard Rufford that was,—“You better make Mr. Hardcastle give an account of himself and his intentions; for only you can bring him to book. It is by the merest accident you see him now, and he has confessed to being in Naples a couple of days; or rather my sister betrayed him after he had committed himself by walking into her salon when I was there.”

Hardcastle stammered something and positively blushed. Never expecting to see Mrs. Bourke at the station, he had deferred proposing the concoction of a story to Lord Wharfdale, and now he was utterly taken aback; and no sooner did Alice see his confusion than all her thoughts were in a turmoil, and she turned hot and cold by turns. Only one thing could embarrass the straightforward bluntness of Hardcastle; only one thing could have kept him in hiding at Naples within a short morning's drive of her. He must have been questing on the trail that all but he and she had long given over for lost, and the cold scent must be warming. But what manner of tidings could he give her of the lost one. In vain she strove to read them in his eyes. Her heart sank as his eyes avoided hers. She felt her brain swim, and, half overcome already by the heavy

heat, she leaned against one of the pillars, and would have sunk fainting to the ground had not Lady Wharfdale sprung to her assistance. Then in another moment Hardcastle had her in his arms and carried her gently to a bench. Lady Wharfdale launched at her husband a glance of reproof for his great thoughtlessness, and he shrugged his shoulders in puzzled penitence and bustled off his body servant, Mr. Roper, for a glass of water.

But the faintness passed as fast as it had come and Alice regained her senses almost ere she had parted with them.

“You shall drive Mr. Hardcastle home in your carriage, dear,” said Edith; “that will be best;” and Alice, though she had come to take special charge of her friend, made no protest against the arrangement. It was no use playing the hypocrite with friends like these, and suspense was intolerable. The steps were hardly up and the carriage in motion over the rough flagstones before her hand was on his wrist and her silent lips parted in eloquent appeal.

“Don’t be afraid, Alice, and for heaven’s sake keep quiet and don’t agitate yourself unnecessarily. My news are good so far as they go, and had I not chanced to run up against the Wharfdales, I had intended they should be better before I saw you. On second thoughts, however, I believe it is all for the best. You see——”

Alice broke in again with an impatience that was almost angry in spite of the affectionate gratitude she had good reason to feel for Hardcastle. “What of him—where is he? Do speak, I implore you—not in Naples here?”

“No, not in Naples, although he may be still in

Neapolitan territory. If not, he is in the Papal States; but that is precisely what I have got to find out."

"We shall find him, then, at last? Do tell me all you know, and I will promise to be quiet and listen patiently."

Then Hardcastle told his tale—a tale we must supplement by a final sketch of the recent life of the Marchioness de San Lorenzo, for she, too, was an old acquaintance, born Julia Rufford, subsequently Countess de Chaillot. Madame de Chaillot had united herself in second nuptials to this Neapolitan marquis, whom she had known in early days, when she used to be a good deal abroad in Italy with her uncle. The marquis was a liberal of the liberals, who, to do him justice, worked honestly for the reputation he earned among the Tories in the Nobles' club as a traitor to his order. His political colours were strongly tinged with red; his enemies called his patriotism fanaticism, and his inspirations were those of the clique who took their *mots d'ordre* from Caprera. Notwithstanding the supervision of the King of Italy's police the marquis's mansion in the Toledo was a favourite rendezvous of the reckless miners who were again driving their subterranean shafts beneath the chair of St. Peter. In his wife he found a helpmeet for him. The lady's talents for intrigue made themselves the handmaidens of her disappointed ambitions; and in revenge for a social career whose bloom had been blighted in an union with a needy Neapolitan, Julia Rufford had become the Egeria of a set of feather-brained and obscure adventurers. It was the reflection of her old fascinations—the tinsel of her look and talk rather than the seared shimmer of her faded beauty—that inspired the gamblers who were gathering for their great game of brag with the Holy Father.

The marquis had recruited a stranger somewhere who had struck him as likely to prove a great gain to the cause. The latest acquisition bore a French name, D'Acre, though he had something of an English look. But he spoke French and English, and other languages to boot, with a fluency that defied a foreigner to decide on his nationality. There was a certain earnestness of purpose about him, combined with the subdued recklessness likely to count for so much in a hairbrained enterprise that could only succeed by a miracle. The marchioness was interested for once and prepared to throw her doors wide open to this dark-souled Lara. As her husband ushered in the honoured guest, the mutual recognition merely hung fire for a moment while recollection flashed from feature to feature, like the fire that travels along a powder train. Then old kindness blazed up, the slow years were bridged that had passed since they met in the woods of Barham, and they shook hands so warmly that even the discreet marquis could not suppress an ejaculation of surprise. Ralph was back again for a second or two in the life of old days. The marchioness, on her side, had the impulse to do him a kindness for the sake of these old times, and, before she and her guest were left alone, she had despatched a telegram to Hardcastle's address in London. Nor did she deem it necessary to make confession when Ralph took an early opportunity of praying her to keep his secret. She rejoined by telling him abruptly that at that very moment his sister Alice was within something more than a couple of hours of him. She did not greatly like Alice; was, indeed, very jealous of her happiness; but then she was anxious to do Alice's brother a good turn. She had known something of his deep love for his sister, and she

half hoped the shock of this sudden temptation might reclaim the truant. And Ralph was so sorely tempted that he desperately resolved on hurried flight; that is to say, on pushing his way to the front of the coming struggle. Tearing himself away from that fleeting glimpse of the brightness of long ago that left his present gloomier than ever, he urged sternly upon Julia that she had no right to betray him. Julia yielded on reflection to his rough rhetoric—yielded the more readily that already she thought of the pleasure her news might have given the too happy Alice, and remembered that, in any case, this wild haggard would be sweeping down wind towards the storms brewing in the Apennines before his sister could hasten to Naples to appropriate him; that if any one could follow and reclaim him, it was Hardcastle; that, if her message found Hardcastle in London, he would speedily be there in pursuit.

Hardcastle had come, travelling at the best speed of express-trains and Messageries' steamers, and the only question was, had he come in time. He asserted his belief that he had, and that he was risking nothing in spending an evening at Sorrento.

"You see, Alice, everything is in our favour; we have marked Ralph down, and he has run himself into a trap where he will be caught without being killed. The guerillas are swarming into the States of the church, but they must keep together for their own sakes; they will cluster like a swarm of wasps on one of the peaks of the Apennines, and take my word for it they will have to disperse at last or else surrender at discretion. The Italian Government must admit the French intervention; there is no danger whatever of the armies coming to loggerheads, and in the face of force like that what can

the redshirts do. If Garibaldi were with them indeed in person he might persuade a handful of *têtes montées* to court the crown of political martyrdom, and run a muck on the bayonets of irresistible force. But very luckily for Ralph Garibaldi is under close surveillance in Caprera, and as for Menotti, the best he can do for the cause will be to keep men enough together to make a creditable capitulation. The Government can only treat them as spoiled children, chide them, pull their ears, and tell them to go home quietly and never do it again."

"But they are hot-headed men, and their blood is up and there may be blows. Can we do nothing but write?"

"Write, not at all. My dear Alice, you can't believe I mean to dawdle in Naples when the man I have been hunting for years is playing at flashing powder so near. Why, the memory of the scurry for life and death we had through that very country in '49 would set the blood boiling in my veins. No, no, I am off forthwith, and would have started yesterday, but Madame de San Lorenzo showed me reason for staying. She promises to-morrow to furnish me with the means of tracing your brother's movements. It would be more haste worse speed if I were gone on a wild-goose chase, when by waiting four-and-twenty hours I could stalk him down to a certainty. Besides, in case of accident, it is of the last consequence I should not be compromised in person with this hair-brained expedition. It is a comfort to think that no man dare reproach me with fearing powder, it reserves me what the diplomats call my full liberty of action. Besides, I have explained the object of my intended expedition to a friend in power, and I hope to-morrow to have letters to the headquarters of Cialdini."

So engrossing was their conversation that although they had dragged up the steep slopes of the cornice of Vico, to dash down again with locked wheels and loose traces; although they had scattered many a chattering group as they clattered through the macaroni-draped villages of the Piano; although whirling through blinding dust they had grazed the lofty wheels of many a triply laden corricolo; although the autumn tints were gorgeous on the russet copse woods that girdled the scathed peaks of Saint Angelo; yet the friends marked nothing of it all from the time they cleared the long street of Castellamare until they turned sharp by the shrine of the Virgin into the little lane that led by lofty garden walls to the villa. Then Hardcastle, who when he was not replying to questions anxiously reiterated for the hundredth time, had been fighting off his companion's expressions of gratitude and selfishly half hearted concern for the personal risks he might run in her service, summed up abruptly.

"Well, here we are, or nearly so, if my memory serves me right. How well I remember my drive with your brother eighteen years ago. For God's sake don't cry, Alice; confound it, I am always putting my foot in it. Be sure I should never have recalled it if I had not seen certain things were on the point of coming round. Well, I shall be off the first thing to-morrow, get to Naples for breakfast, and probably start for the Roman Apennines some time in the course of the day. And if it helps to set your mind at ease by all means go to Rome as soon as you please. In any case, and especially if the collapse come, communicating with Rome may be more easily managed than with Naples. You mean to put up at the Hotel de Napoli, you say; how well I know it! Ah!" Hardcastle checked him-

self again. "Ah, there is Bourke standing by the iron gates; upon my word, that man will soon be years younger than your husband if he goes on like this."

Next morning Hardcastle reached his hotel on the Santa Lucia, to meet the bustling landlord brimful of news.

"Have you heard, excellency? the French fleet is telegraphed off Civita Vecchia."

"Ah," exclaimed Hardcastle, with an obvious satisfaction that irritated the patriotic Italian.

"And our troops have crossed the frontier, occupied Civita Castellana, Aquapendente, and Frosinone, and are in full march on Rome."

"Ah," ejaculated the Englishman again, and this time the ejaculation was of more doubtful meaning.

"And Garibaldi has broken loose from Caprera, sangue de St. Januario! Why couldn't the Government have kept him snug at Alessandria, when they caught him, instead of letting him go to scare travellers and empty hotels?"

"Garibaldi broken loose! the devil, the devil," exclaimed Hardcastle. This time the landlord had his revenge, and had found a sincere sympathizer with his trouble. Evidently the usually imperturbable Hardcastle was greatly moved by the news.

CHAPTER XXVI.

RALPH PERPETRATES HIS CROWNING FOLLY.

IF "positions" are blessed in peace time with all the charms of scenery, of bewitching prospects over hill and

dale and plain—if they have their sunny slopes waving with corn, or streaming with wine and oil, according to their latitudes, Providence calls on them occasionally to buy these privileges with terrible penalties. They may be startled from their drowsy stagnation to find themselves the battle-fields of nations and the blood-stained landmarks of history,—Solferinos, Sadowas, Woërths, and Gravelottes. Lucky those that are scenes of the squabbles of the pigmies instead of the battles of the giants, although even then a trifling affair of outposts may be the certificate of capabilities to future strategists—the first signs of baleful activity in the chronic volcano that may belch out blood and slaughter.

There was life and mirth enough in the shabbily imposing streets of the little mountain town of Monte Rotondo, changed for the nonce to a city of refuge for the reckless who had provoked a catastrophe. Like the peak of the neighbouring Soracte, it drew those lowering storm-clouds that had come rolling up from west and north. French and Italians were on the march, and the inhabitants cowered instinctively as they listened for the first crash of the coming thunder. Vinedressers and woodmen and petty shopkeepers gaped in groups by the street corners on the unwelcome guests who had taken them by storm, and the most of them scowled on the flag that was to replace the tiara and keys of St. Peter.

To them it was nothing but the symbol of disturbance. They were little of politicians, and less of soldiers; they were pretty well used to being shorn close by the taxgatherer, but they distrusted the champions who began by putting their sorely-taxed property in jeopardy, and stopping their labour; nor would a military attaché to the flying, forlorn corps of adventure, have felt any

great confidence in the success of its audacious enterprise, judging by what he saw. It was not by that handful of straggling redshirts, though there were stalwart forms and gallant hearts in the gang, that Garibaldi was likely to work out the salvation of the provinces that sickened under the shadow of the Vatican. Discipline was at a discount, as it might well be, when hot brains and desperate fortunes had been raked wholesale into the patriot ranks, and the party looked as if they had been invited by Folly to a Carnival where Death and Disaster had consented to preside at the revels.

It was true sinister tidings had come of French succour landed in irresistible strength: of a menacing advance of the overwhelming forces of Italy. But optimists argued the two enemies must fly at each other's throats, while the insurrection was left free to settle its difficulties with the Papacy. Meantime those who knew sufficient of contemporary politics formed themselves into debating-clubs. Every man did pretty much what seemed good in his own eyes, save the few sentinels and the outposts, who handled their antiquated weapons almost within chasseur range of the soldiers of Solferino, and all the time scenting the slaughter from afar the ravens and vultures of the Apennines came circling over the grey towers of the old castle of the Orsini.

The summit of the town, one of the grandest standpoints in that magnificent amphitheatre of the Sabine hills, had a solitary occupant. He had dismissed the obsequious custode with a second donation, even more magnificent than that which had lured him up the stairs, crouching, cap in hand, at the heels of the generous stranger. Ralph Dacre had little money left, but he had his forebodings like the vultures, and some-

thing told him he had brief time to spend it in. He looked neither to right nor left along these forest-clad mountains, gemmed with their villas, and towns, and hamlets. He stared straight before him down the valley of the Tiber, across the brown rolling waste, broken here and there by a clump of stone-pines, a solitary farm, a jungle-bedded ruin heap, a line of mouldering arches, to the mighty dome that loomed dimly through the warm haze on the south-western horizon. It marked the city that for him had the fascination of the candle for the moth that already has scorched its wings. It was thither, in the wayward folly of his youth, he had gone to commit himself to the first ill-considered slips of his wasted life, and ever since he had been hurried along by thorny by-paths leading to destruction, the victim of his own faults and follies. Through his regretful wanderings of the last five years his eyes had been ever turning to his first false start in Rome; and to his superstitious fancy it had seemed the destined Mecca of his pilgrimage, when first he heard that Garibaldi's dreams were taking shape and form. As he leaned over the battlements, deaf to the clamour of the jackdaws, blind to the circling flights of the swallows, memory flew back to the day when he broke away from the roof-tree of his grandfather at Heppenstall. The stream of time caught him in a back eddy, as he recalled each vivid detail of that Roman visit, his arrest, the violence of the mob, the rescue by Hardcastle, the escape to Naples, his embittered disappointment when death betrayed the shameful story of his father's life. There was another delusive calm as he dwelt on his arrival in England, the hearty reception of the frank Boycott, the powerful patronage tendered so freely by Lord Wharfdale; above all, his cousin's half proffered love, the

love he had turned from, to sell himself for the devil's wage as Asgill's tool and accomplice. After that, one long succession of seething whirlpools with deep dark treacherous waters; of the restless rush of breaking waves; of leap after leap into abyss on abyss, until that final and fatal one when he disappeared from the light of his world, to run a dishonoured course in despair and darkness. Little to look back upon with comfort in those last five years, although at least they had been unstained by vice or crime. Even they had been fruitful of fresh remorse, in that he had ever had the worst of it in his struggle with the gnawing regrets that could only be healed or dulled by earnest vigorous action. He knew it now, as he had often felt it before; he had too lightly silenced upbraiding conscience with the answer, that he had left himself a lonely man, who could make no better reparation to those who had loved him most, than suppression in final oblivion. Only a few days back and he had persuaded himself that in setting his face towards the banner of Garibaldi he was following the path of chivalrous duty, and not rushing open-eyed on suicide. The cause was a noble one, none nobler he had told himself and——. Now he acknowledged he had cared nothing at all for the Romans, so long as he had a fair chance of stumbling upon death without seeming to seek it. Selfish to the last; he knew it now, since he had heard of Alice at Sorrento. How his longing heart had leaped out to her, as before tearing himself from Naples, he had gazed over the bay to the Piano, till the rising sunbeams had dimmed his aching eyes. Even now he felt, with the sense of her presence recently so strong upon him, as if life had still something worth the living for; as if even he might discover cause for regret when he came to

leave it. Was it the mania of a mind slightly deranged by suffering, that he who had once believed in money as only second to ambition, held it so cheaply now. Already he had forgotten what he had heard from Julia, of those new-found treasures that had made the rental of Allonby far more than the utmost he had once pretended it to be. No; the thought that Alice must feel she held that wealth for him, and that he might still be rich if he only willed it, never weighed for a moment. If he looked back lingeringly, when now as he fancied, he stood between life and death, it was only that it seemed to him he could die the happier for one last embrace of his sister. And then she was so near him, no farther away than Sorrento. If he had only known she was already in the city he was gazing on!

The very consciousness that she was shaking his resolution made him long for some desperate occasion that should decide him. Selfish that he was, Alice had mourned him bitterly. He knew that well, and now that she had consoled herself with time, her husband and her children—now that the world had perhaps forgiven her his fault, he would go for a selfish fancy and tear the old wound open; he would attract to her again the sneers of the malicious and uncharitable. Not to be dreamed of in cold blood for a moment! Oh, that that noisy mob he looked down upon from his vantage-stand only promised some better chance of making a fair fight of it. Enough of the maudlin moralizing that unmanned him; he must have violent action and change of scene, and something to eat as well, if he meant to keep up strength and spirit. He descended the worn stairs, three steps at a time with something of the old feverish energy; brushed through the crowd of peasants and burghers, and roving paladins; made his way to the

horse he had left stabled in the cloisters of a neighbouring church, and pushed him swiftly down the steep hill, with the vague idea of finding refreshment in some quieter *osteria* in the plain.

A quarter of an hour's sharp riding, and he saw the place he sought: the withered bush swung in the air before a pink-washed dwelling, half screened from the sun by the shrivelling foliage of a solitary sycamore. He drew rein as he turned the corner of the stable, to find a round dozen of bridleless steeds picketed in front of a long trough, while their riders had started to their feet, and were watching for the new comer. They had the air of conspirators scared into distrustful ferocity; and armed to the teeth as they were there was nothing reassuring in their aspect to a man who held strongly to his life. All Ralph Dacre cared for was the fact of his having blundered into company when he sought for solitude. It was nothing to him that the men he had disturbed were friends and Garibaldians. Regardless of a silence more appalling than any challenge, he swiftly wheeled his horse, nor even turned his head to the sharp clicking of carbine and pistol locks. When a man bounded forward, and a hand was laid on his own bridle, as his horse slipped on the flags he made a snatch at his holsters. But he checked the movement immediately; he was not going to shed the blood of those who should be comrades for the sake of dragging that weary burden of his a few yards further. If they cared for his life, they were very welcome to it. Explanations ensued, and ended in the party proceeding with those arrangements for boot and saddle he had interrupted: enveloping him in their centre, and carrying him half a prisoner along the road to Rome. Dacre said nothing. He began to fancy that his captors were

Papalini in disguise; and as he dreamed of the galleys instead of the grave, his heart did sink a little, and he felt that fortune might still have ugly times at his service. Speedily he was reassured as to the character of his new acquaintances. In the shade of some spreading trees by a villa some mile or two further on, they joined themselves to a stronger party, under the command of an officer whom Dacre recognized. He had met and been presented to him but the day before in the quarters of the general, and had heard enough of him to be aware that among all the adventurers no man bore a higher character for chivalrous courage. The recognition was mutual. The officer saluted courteously, and tendered Mr. Dacre his apologies for his detention.

"A mistake of over zeal, signor, which a gallant man will know how to forgive. But when men go upon an adventure carrying their lives in their hands, it is difficult to blame them for over caution."

"The detention has merely delayed my intended meal by a few minutes," returned Dacre, with his old blandness. "Would it be indiscreet to enquire the object of your adventure?" he added, as an idea struck him. "Forgive the abruptness of the question, signor," he went on, "it's excuse must be, that it struck me you might accept a volunteer."

Had Ralph Dacre been less gloomily minded, he might well have hesitated when he heard the nature of the expedition he had offered for. A dash in open day at the holy city with a handful of some fifty men, on the chance of running the gauntlet of the guards of the temporal power, and reaching a desperate hand to the friends within the walls, who had promised to raise the Romans. Because the notion of the remotest chance of

a success so utterly shocked Ralph's common sense, the idea chimed most happily with his humour. If anything scared him in it, it was the thought of fifty men in health and hope, and with something left them to live for, riding blindly to their destruction. A glance assured him he would pour out his warnings in heedless ears, even had the gallant enthusiast who led them suffered him to tamper with his followers. So he tightened his belt by a hole or two, thrust his feet down in his stirrups, set his eyes on St. Peter's, and his thoughts on his coming end, and rode forward with a saddened equanimity. The brother of the leader whispered in his brother's ear, "Now, Carlo, if I were more superstitious, I could wish that Englishman had stayed behind. If he has not cast the *jettatura* from those gloomy eyes of his, he carries the sentence of a speedy death written visibly on his forehead." The other shrugged his shoulders, and made no reply. Just at that moment the vedette who rode two carbine shots ahead of the troop had reined his horse on a rising ground. The leader pushed forward to join him; it needed not the motion of the other's finger to place him *au fait* of the situation. On the straight road they were following, and a mile and a half in front of them, a heavy cloud of dust came rolling towards them.

"A drove of horses?" queried the officer, clinging to a straw of hope.

"Horses with riders then," answered the other, "those accursed carabinieri of the Pope are out in force."

The leader turned sharp to his men.

"Comrades, there, in front of us are the hirelings of his Holiness. Over their bodies lies the only road to your Roman brothers; will you follow me or go back to our friends in Monte Rotondo?"

Dacre looked on curiously as a disinterested spectator. There was perceptible lengthening in a face or two, but no man could summon the courage to fly at a moment's notice, albeit, it seemed likely enough that none of those he deserted would live to betray him.

"Enough!" said the leader, clenching the nail. "Then are you ready? Remember, seconds count for lives. Close up! Charge!"

A jostling whirlwind sweeping the narrow causeway; a horse that slipped and tumbled in the trench that skirted the Campagna, crushing his rider's ribs against the baked clay of the bank; another that slipped in the van to be pounded with the wretch he carried beneath the hoofs of the flying squadron behind; and on they went at racing speed, charging down on the living barriers drawn up to seal the passage. Can the stoutest bone from the fattest breeding grounds of the marshes stand a shock like that, even if the rider's courage be steadfast as it seems? That was what Dacre asked himself, as a strong puff of the north wind lifted the dust clear of them. He had sagely held his horse well back from the ruck, anxious to reserve himself for a nobler death than that of a crushed worm. The question he asked was never answered. Somewhat nearer them than the hostile troops, to right and left of the road, stood a group of huts, that scarcely made a hamlet; the best and biggest of them surrounded by a high enclosure. Right in front of these, and across the road, lay a fallen tree trunk, hitherto concealed by the dust from the Garibaldini. As those in front strove to pull in at the sight of it, those behind came crushing up on their cruppers; the highway was choked from side to side by a swaying, surging, swearing mass, from which the leader was seen struggling out to the

front to force his horse over the obstacle, as his voice dominated the turmoil. The *papalini* never stirred to take advantage of the confusion, and just then, from loop-holes in the enclosure wall, from doors and windows, from apertures torn in the very reed-thatch of the huts, came vomiting forth fire, and ball, and death. The grey dust clouds were dyed black by the rolling volumes of dense powder-smoke: horse and man sunk down on the bloody roadway in writhing heaps. Those who were somewhat sheltered by their comrades, drew out of the butchery, and turned their horses' heads for their city of refuge on the mountains. In vain; treachery had given timely warning, and the snare had been too thoroughly set. Silently another party of papal zouaves had emerged from the ivied arches of an aqueduct they had passed behind, and formed a cordon, too strong for stray fugitives to break. The adventurers' nerve was shaken, and no wonder. They cast away carbines and pistols they had scarcely discharged, and shouted for the quarter that was reluctantly granted them. Their leader had seen his brother roll under his feet, shot through the body; had run the gauntlet of the cross shower of balls from the cottages; had charged up to the enemy's horse, emptied one saddle with his pistol, another with his sabre; had been cut from his own with a blow struck from behind, been picked up for dead, and tossed aside for the moment. Ralph had sought to follow his example, but with less luck. A side ball struck his horse in mid career, and his rider had barely time to throw himself clear, as the animal came crashing heavily on the iron ground. It was a moment ere he could disentangle himself from the clinging stirrups or regain his feet: when he did, and snatched to his belt, he found his revolver had slipped

from it, and before he could draw his sword, the muzzle of a chassepot seemed covering his chest from a yard off. As he threw himself forward, the ball passed under his arm, and in another moment he was surrounded by numbers, mastered, and disarmed. He ground his teeth in his disappointment,—he looked so mischievous that the man nearest him shrunk back involuntarily and loosened his hold. That movement was decisive of his fate. All seemed over already; the papalini had ceased their fire and were picking up prisoners, when a wounded insurgent painfully writhing himself up on his elbow, rested his weapon on the neck of his dead horse, and discharged it in blind vengeance among his enemies. The bullet threaded their broken ranks to strike Ralph Dacre under the sword-belt. He reeled forward to sink senseless in the arms of his captors. Unlucky to the last, he found by an accident the death he had courted in honourable action.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE RAPIDS ARE SHOT.

MARTIN HARDCASTLE had found his Italian letters of recommendation less potent than he had hoped. Adventurers had been passing the lines of the regulars on all manner of pretences, and the countersign that denied passage to all without exception, was applied universally and inexorably. So instead of risking arrest, at a moment when freedom of action might be so essential, he took his decision at once, and made his way to Rome. By the help of the Emperor of the

French, the saints seemed sure to win in the long run, and when the handful of the enemy should capitulate, it was up the sacred way to the capitol, they were likely to be led in triumph. But there were venerable spies in the pay of his Holiness, who had not forgotten the leaders of '49; and our friend Hardcastle was looked upon with suspicion in clerical circles. He was honoured by a special agent of safety, told off on his individual account—no other than our old acquaintance Volpone, and there was nothing for it but waiting patiently upon events. It would have been as much as his freedom was worth, to venture an application to go scouting beyond the walls.

Generally speaking he kicked his heels by choice in the quarters by the gates towards which news from the insurgent camp was most likely to travel, and one mid-day groups were gathered in jabbering converse beneath the eastern slopes of the capitol. Sounds of firing had been wafted from the east; some asserted the mercenaries of his Holiness had beaten an ignominious retreat upon their French allies; others that "rebellion had had ill luck," and the columns of Failly and Kanzler, were at that moment in a simultaneous attack carrying the heights from Mentana to Monte Rotondo. Just then came a messenger fiery red with speed, to say that a couple of cartfuls of wounded had entered by another road, and were lumbering towards the hospital of Santo Spirito. The mob broke up in enthusiasm, and with one consent started thither hot-foot.

"You are interested to see these wounded, Signor?" queried a citizen, catching at Hardcastle, as he brushed past him.

"Surely, surely," rejoined the other, impatiently.

"Excuse the liberty I take then, but I see you are

a stranger, and should be sorry you had your trouble for nothing. It is at the hospital of the Consolazione that beds are prepared for the fresh arrivals. I am one of the surgeons, and ought to know," he added, as he saw Hardcastle look doubtful.

Hardcastle yielded to conviction, cordially thanked his new acquaintance, and placed himself under his guidance.

Without such an ally, he would have found it hard to gain admittance to the hospital courtyard, for they turned into the street that led to it, in time to see the gates close upon the wheels of the carts, and in the faces of the crowd.

They pressed forward to inquire the news, and Hardcastle turned to the carts, to see if any of their occupants was in a condition to enlighten him. The first was filled with the lightly hurt, two or three papal Zouaves and gendarmes; and three or four of the red-shirts, who shrunk away in sullen gloom in the other end of the cart. In the second, the more sorely wounded groaned at their length upon the straw; all Garibaldians these, and most of them in a state so miserable, as to care little indeed what a week or two might have in store for them. Hardcastle had been sufficiently familiar with death and wounds, yet he paused involuntarily as one wretch was lifted out moaning and writhing like the corpse of Eastern legend, condemned to bear its mortal agony after the spirit had flitted from the tenement of clay. A stain of deeper purple on the back of his travel-soiled red shirt, showed that it was in spite of a bullet through the body, that life had not yet been jolted out of him. As Hardcastle was watching his being lifted on to a stretcher, he fancied he heard a faint exclamation like an English "My God." If his

ear had not played him false, it must have come from the man behind, and he was trying to bury his face in the shoulder of the *infirmier*, who was raising his drooping shoulders in his arms. The very attempt arrested Hardcastle's attention; his pulses beat quicker. Had accident brought him to the end of his quest? One long earnest look, and no room was left for doubt, although the wounded man might well have defied detection by a hasty glance. He must have passed unnoticed had not the ejaculation betrayed him, and already under the excitement of the recognition Ralph had swooned. Hardcastle hurried away after his new ally the surgeon. That gentleman was speedily by the stretcher of the wounded man, and made a hurried inspection of his state. Then he shook his head. "The ball, as you see, has entered here under the left breast, travelled apparently upwards, and buried itself deep in the body. It was hand to hand fighting they say, and though the papal powder may be bad, your friend is"—he finished the sentence with a significant shake of the head. "Yes, certainly, Signor, as he has borne so much he may linger on for days."

Hardcastle hesitated a moment; then took his resolution.

"I only know you, sir, by an act of courtesy done an utter stranger, and yet I feel moved to demand a great favour." Then he hastily explained something of the circumstances. Ralph's sister waiting in the town, prepared for something very different from the blow that had fallen. "It would shock her terribly, the seeing her brother die in a hospital among wounded. For her sake is it possible to have him moved to the hotel? I am certain he cannot possibly have better attendance than here," added Hardcastle, with diplomatic courtesy.

The Roman smiled. "I know you Englishmen have no faith in anything but native surgery, and abuse us of the Italian school as barbers or butchers. Unhappily, as I said, your friend is beyond the aid of man: the most we can do is to alleviate his suffering during hours that are numbered. It is no professional pique that makes me see obstacles; but remember he is a prisoner caught red hand with insurrectionists, and I—well, I am not in the best odour with the authorities. However, I should fancy they will make little objection to having a man as good as dead taken off their hands."

The result justified the surgeon's prevision. Ralph Dacre was transported, under his friend's care, to the Hotel de Napoli, the landlord's reluctance being overcome by judicious blending of threats and promises.

Before Hardcastle saw the patient again he had called the best English advice to his assistance. He must know how far Dacre's sinking powers would bear the strain of agitating interviews. The English surgeons confirmed all that had been said by their Roman compeer. "Nothing can save him: to attempt to probe the wound would be useless torture. His strong vitality may carry him on for days; a violent agitation may carry him off at any moment." But, as he had plainly recognized Hardcastle, they agreed it would be likely to do him less harm than good the seeing that gentleman. A powerful opiate might secure him rest and relief for the night, but it would be infinitely better he should avoid any interview with his sister if it were likely to be agitating.

Likely to be agitating! How agitating it was likely to be Hardcastle knew well, although he could give the doctors little inkling of the matter; and it must be

broken somehow to Alice that the brother she had sought so long was lying under the same roof with her, and stricken down past recovery. Fortunately, he had succeeded in smuggling the sick man in by a side door and having him lodged in the opposite corner of the hotel from the apartments occupied by the Bourkes. In these days strangers were as little plentiful in Rome as avowed allies of the insurrection. But she might learn the presence of a wounded stranger at any moment, and then——. Bourke was out and Hardcastle dare not go in search of him in case of some *contretemps* happening in his absence. So he sent Antonio, the courier, on that errand, and posted himself meantime in observation on Alice's door.

Luckily Antonio succeeded and brought back his master, and Philip's face sank at the thought of this fresh suffering that awaited his wife. Hardcastle read rightly the expression that first crossed his friend's features; he knew it was disgust at the irrepressible brother who came cropping up again to mar the tranquil happiness that came of time and oblivion. Hardcastle could hardly blame him, but he laid his hand on his wrist and said gravely and far more softly than his wont. "You must bear with him this once, Bourke, and forgive him once and for all. Remember how long and how heavy has been his punishment: recollect it is all but over, and he can never trouble you again."

Bourke bowed his head assentingly, pressed the other's hand, and turned into his wife's room. When they sent for Hardcastle Alice had stilled the tumult of her grief; only her bosom still rose and fell with an occasional shuddering sob, like the after-heavings of a dying storm. She pressed Hardcastle's hand in hers. "You have seen him, then?"

"Seen him, not spoken to him."

Alice drew a long breath of relief, while, at the same time, her eyes were raised in anguish to heaven like a *mater dolorosa* praying for immortal strength to bear.

"He must never know we are so near him,— that the sister he loved so well, that he still loves so dearly, is under the roof with him. I will not have his last moments agitated."

Yet, next morning, Alice was standing by her brother's bed, and under the passing excitement, the life-flame of the dying man had flickered up in the socket till it burned almost clear. When Hardcastle had seen him the evening before, after one feeble squeeze of the hand, he had hurried straight to the subjects of his heart, as if breath and seconds had been far too precious to waste, and had asked after his sister. Vain were all evasions, and Hardcastle felt somehow, it would be sacrilege deceiving this dying man, who had lived systematic falsehood through the flush of his youth, and the force of his prime.

"She is here, in Rome, Hardcastle, I know she is; and in infinite mercy, has been sent to a great sinner, a sign of reconciliation and forgiveness."

His face brightened and his frame thrilled, as if he had gulped a draught of the fabled elixir of life; the thought of the coming meeting lighted like an anodyne on a body racked by shooting pain, on nerves jaded by long-sustained suffering. The release he had longed for so ardently was at hand at last, and the sister he had so loved and wronged, had been sent to his dying pillow to bid him God speed in the dark journey that lay before him. Hardcastle felt there was but one thing to be done, in the teeth of all the medical

warnings in the world; of all the consequences probable. He hurried to the sister's room; told her briefly what had passed, and led her smiling wanly through her fast-falling tears to her brother.

For himself, he stopped on the threshold, closed the door, and left them. What passed between brother and sister was meant for no ears but theirs. Alice felt that much of it was sacred, even for her husband. Of this we may be sure: Ralph made such free confession as no priest in Rome had listened to that day; that so far as human forgiveness and pitying sympathy with feeble nature could go, no penitent in Rome was soothed and shrived with words of such angel comfort.

Eased of the load that interview lifted from his mind, Ralph bore his heavy bodily sufferings like a featherweight. Now that he knew his career on earth was run—that he was merely left lingering on sufferance—he seemed to cling to each precious minute. Had the medical attendants announced to him the prospect of a speedy cure, he would most likely have sunk at once under the shock of the despairing disappointment; as it was, this coming home again for a little space, after all his wanderings, was like a foretaste on earth of the future he humbly hoped for. He loved to see round his bed the old friends who had gathered to him. Now he was struggling through the mists, and all was ending so brightly, he could hardly bring himself to regret the time when by deliberate choice he had chosen sin and misery for peace and happiness. Edith was there, and Alice. He had despised the love of the one, and betrayed the affection and loving confidence of the other. Either might have saved him, if he would, but he had wantonly abandoned himself to the rush of the baser passions that swept him down towards perdition. He

clung to the hands a miracle had reached him as he was hurrying into the abyss, and now he had no room for anything but gratitude.

If he still had thought for earth, it was only that he might make it pleasanter for others. He read in the eyes around him that the fulfilment of each wish he breathed would be a sacred pleasure. He knew he would make the possession of Allonby sweeter to his sister, if he could contrive to charge it with conditions she would be too happy to fulfil. Claspings Hardcastle's brown hand in his wasting fingers, he prayed Alice to place the house at Allonby at her old friend's disposal for his lifetime, and with such an income as drove the veteran campaigner to enter unavailing protests in tones unbefitting the chamber of death. Alice thanked her brother for the thoughtful arrangement, as she looked across to Hardcastle with eyes that were sadly triumphant at constraining him to independence, and the acceptance of something in exchange for all they owed him. Then there were legacies to Müller, Roper, others of our acquaintances. There were parting messages to Mr. Boycott, left keeping house peacefully at Barham, and spoiling Edith's second son, whom he had insisted on appropriating as his heir; words of kindness to Julia, Marchioness of San Lorenzo; and then he stopped and hesitated. Anxious that worldly affairs should be settled once and for all, Alice pressed him.

"There is some one you know, Alice, who, next to me has done more to injure you than any man living."

Alice trembled, not for her own wrongs, but for her brother. At that moment she hated Asgill in her heart, and all the time she shuddered at the thought that the dying man shared the feeling.

"If I have taught myself nothing else," he proceeded, "I trust I have learned to judge my fellow-creatures leniently. If you ever find him, Hardcastle, and I should know something of how you seek the lost ones—if you ever find him, will you snatch him from want and temptation for my sake, and give him at least the opportunity for repentance?"

Hardcastle nodded in silence as he drew his hand across his eyes.

"No use disturbing him, then? eh?" he inquired, somewhat doubtfully, of Philip Bourke afterwards. "But Asgill lies sentenced to imprisonment for life for passing forged bank-notes in Paris."

Ralph was satisfied and sunk back in the bed, exhausted with his efforts now the excitement was passed. The others had left the room, all but Hardcastle, who withdrew to a chair by the window, and Alice, who sat on, clasping her sleeping brother's hand. Of a sudden, she started with a sharp cry from her sad reveries. Hardcastle was by her side in a moment.

"His hand—his hand! how cold it is!"

Hardcastle touched the wrist, and bent over the pillow. The pulse had ceased to beat, and the heart was stilled. The wound had broken out in internal bleeding, and Ralph Dacre at last had shot the rapids.

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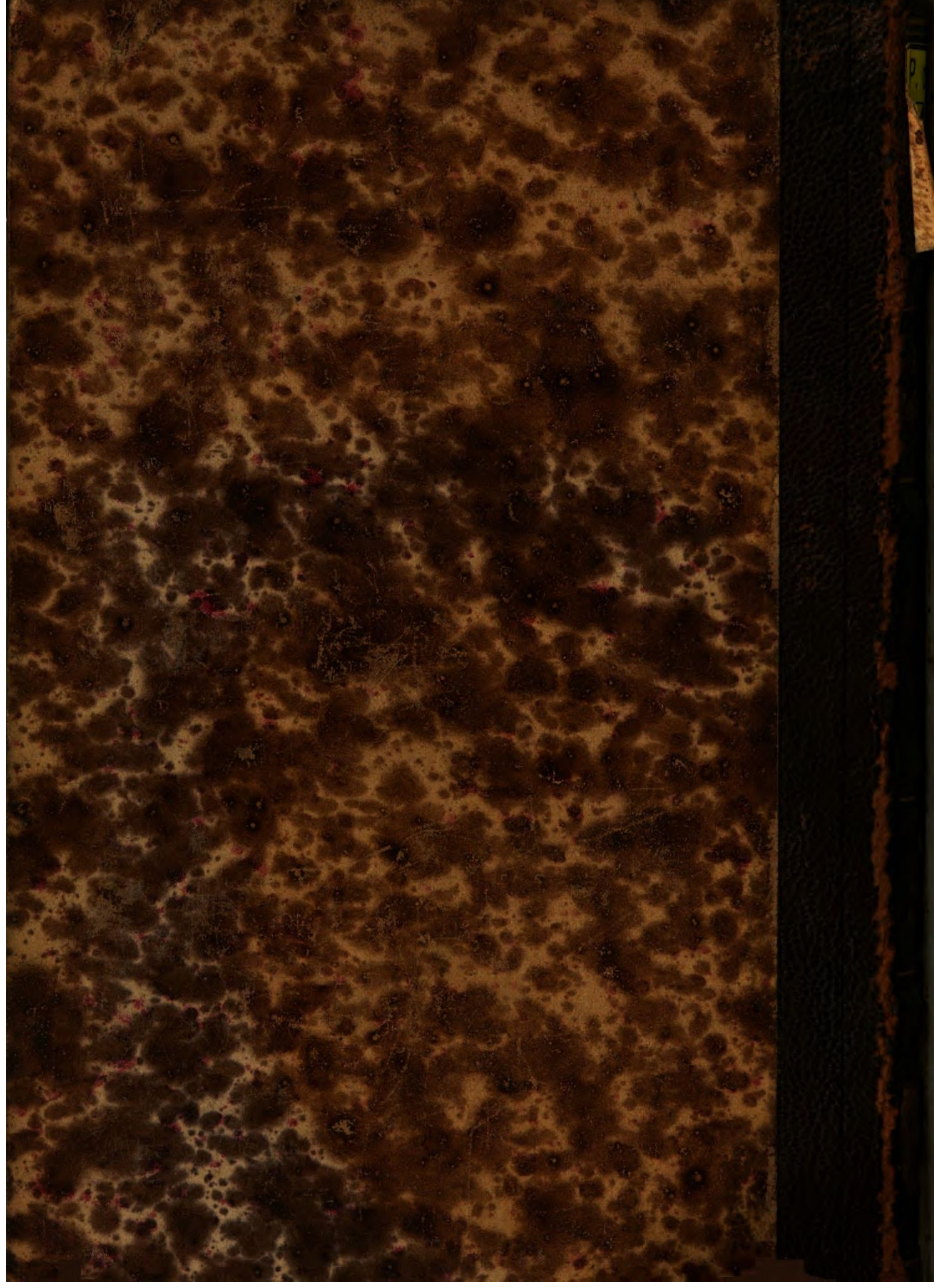
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